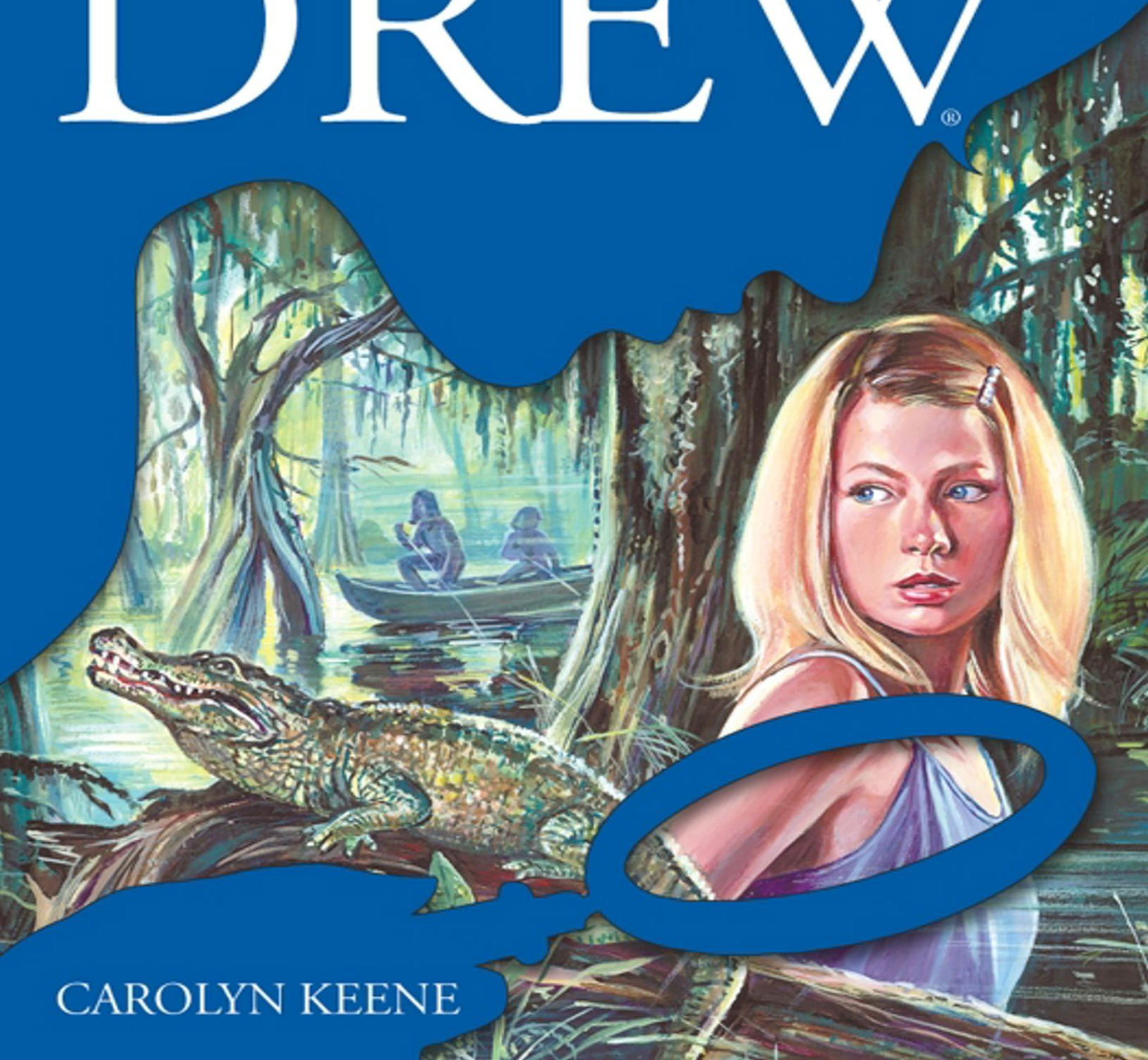


LOST IN THE EVERGLADES

A young woman is missing—and Nancy's on a deadly journey to find the truth!

# NANCY DREW<sup>®</sup> 161



CAROLYN KEENE

## **A Deadly Disappearance**

Susan Bokan, an old friend of Nancy's from River Heights who was a park volunteer at the Everglades, waved to a dark-haired guy who was just getting up from a table across the room. She gestured for him to come over.

"Girls, this is Griffin Carey. He's a fellow park volunteer, and he's training to be a ranger." Susan turned to Griffin. "Nancy and her friends are going to help me—help us—try to find Jade. Nancy has a lot of experience solving mysteries."

Before Griffin had a chance to respond, Nancy said, "You might be able to answer some questions for us, Griffin. Like how was Jade acting around the time she disappeared?"

"D-disappeared?" Griffin repeated dumbly as his face began turning red. He clenched his hands into fists. "I can't believe you're asking these questions!" he exploded. "Jade is dead. She didn't 'disappear,' she's D-E-A-D, *dead*. Let her rest in peace and drop your crazy investigation!"

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# 1

## ***Welcome to the Everglades***

"Are we there yet?" eighteen-year-old Bess Marvin grumbled. "It feels like we've been driving forever."

Nancy Drew glanced into the rearview mirror of the rental car and smiled at her friend, who was fidgeting in the backseat. "Almost. The sign back there said that the entrance to Everglades National Park was coming right up."

George Fayne, who was sitting next to Nancy, spread the map of southern Florida across her lap. She smoothed the crinkles and creases with her fingertips. "The Everglades is *huge*. Like millions of acres. The place where we're staying, Flamingo, is only a tiny part of it."

"Flamingo is way at the bottom of the Everglades, right on Florida Bay," Nancy explained.

Nancy turned off the air conditioner and rolled the window down slightly. A hot breeze blew against her face and ruffled her reddish blond hair.

The scenery was the same as it had been for the last half hour: dry, flat fields; orange farms; and the occasional grocery store, house, or strip mall with forlorn-looking For Rent signs.

The scenery didn't look anything like what Susan Bokan had described to Nancy in her many postcards. Susan used to be a good friend of the girls back in River Heights.

The girls had met Susan five years earlier. Susan's parents owned a fancy inn on the outskirts of River Heights. The Bokans were clients of Nancy's father, Carson Drew, who was an attorney.

The girls hadn't seen Susan since she moved to Florida a couple of years earlier to work as a volunteer for the Everglades National Park. Her parents were still in River Heights, although they spent part of every winter in Florida to visit their daughter.

In her postcards, Susan described the beautiful, wild, and junglelike Everglades. The photographs on the cards showed exotic-looking plants and animals with exotic-sounding names like gumbo-limbo trees, strangler figs, roseate spoonbills, and manatees.

In her last postcard Susan had asked Nancy to visit her as soon as possible, and to bring George and Bess along. Nancy had wondered about the invitation. There was something out-of-the-blue and mysterious about it. Still, she and her friends were eager to visit the Everglades, so it didn't take much to convince them.

"There it is." Bess's blond head appeared between the two front seats. "There's the sign— Everglades National Park. We're here, finally!"

"I can't wait to see Susan," George said eagerly. "I can't wait to go on hikes and canoe trips and—"

"I can't wait to have dinner," Bess interrupted. "It's after six o'clock. The last thing we ate were those itty-bitty bags



of peanuts on the plane, and I'm totally starving."

Nancy chuckled. Despite the fact that George and Bess were cousins, they were as different as night and day. It wasn't just that George was tall and slender with short, dark hair, and Bess was short and curvy with long, curly blond hair.

Nancy could already anticipate the rest of their Florida vacation: George would be off on hikes and canoe trips and kayaking expeditions, while Bess would be more interested in hanging out in a beach chair, working on her tan, and sampling the local cuisine. For weeks Bess had been talking about checking out such Florida specialties as conch chowder, Key lime pie, and blackened grouper.

Nancy pulled up to the ranger station. A grayhaired man in a khaki-colored uniform put down his walkie-talkie and smiled at her. "May I help you, miss?"

"I'm looking for the volunteers' dorm at Flamingo," Nancy explained.

The ranger scribbled some directions on a brochure map and handed it to her. "Follow my red arrows. Be there in no time."

"Thank you," Nancy said.

She waved goodbye to the ranger and drove through the gate, into the park. Almost immediately, Nancy could see that they were in a totally different world.

This is the Florida Susan described in her postcards, she thought.

It felt as though they had gone back to prehistoric times. Nancy was reminded of the scenery in dinosaur movies. The landscape consisted of huge, sweeping palm trees, brightly colored tropical flowers, and tangly vines that wound around everything. Massive birds swooped through the air or perched on branches, preening their feathers with their enormous beaks.

Driving around a bend in the road, Nancy and her friends passed a wide field of tall, greenish brown sawgrass that billowed in the breeze. Just beyond the field was a large, murky pond bordered by tall, skinny cattails. Nancy could make out a family of alligators sunning themselves on the muddy banks. There were tiny white birds perched on their backs.

Bess pointed at the alligators. "Are . . . are those what I think they are?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"They're alligators," Nancy said, and then she hesitated. "Or are they crocodiles? I don't remember what the difference is."

"I think crocodiles have pointier snouts," George said. "Plus, they're supposed to be meaner than alligators."

Bess's eyes grew wide. "Which ones eat people?"

"They both do, if you bother them," George said. "Just stay away from them, and they'll stay away from you. That's Alligator and Crocodile 101."

"I'm staying *way* far away from them, believe me," Bess said with a shudder.

Nancy grinned. "Ditto."

They proceeded down the road, past more palm trees and marshes and other spectacular scenery. "This place is really beautiful," Nancy remarked. "No wonder Susan likes working here."

"I can't wait to explore the park," George said.

"I can't wait to explore the pool," Bess said. "Our hotel does have one, right?"

"We're staying in a cabin near Susan's dorm. I kind of doubt it has a pool," Nancy replied.

George began folding up the road map. "I guess we won't be needing *this* anymore," she said. "You know, I wonder why Susan suddenly invited us down here, after all this time?"

"I've been wondering the same thing," Nancy said.

"I think she just missed us," Bess said. "I mean, wouldn't *you* miss us? We're so much fun to have around!" She reached into her oversize straw bag and pulled out a pair of pink rhinestone sunglasses. "What do you think, girls? I got these for the trip."

"They're . . . interesting," George said politely.

Nancy glanced into the rearview mirror. "They're very *you*, Bess," she said with a laugh.

After a few minutes they arrived at what looked like a small village. To the left of them was Florida Bay. There was a marina crowded with sailboats and motorboats. Near the marina was a cluster of buildings, including shops and a motel and a visitors' center. A flock of seagulls sat on the roof of the visitors' center, shrieking and squawking and

flapping their wings. The colors of the sunset shimmered on the water.

“Why don’t you park, and I’ll go ask someone how to get to Susan’s dorm?” George offered.

Nancy nodded. “Good idea.”

She pulled into a parking space, and George hopped out of the car. Nancy watched as George jogged over to a young guy in a ranger uniform.

A minute later George jogged back and slid into the car. “Go straight a quarter of a mile and to the left,” she said. “He says we can’t miss it.”

“Thanks, George.”

Nancy continued down the road. She was getting really psyched about seeing Susan. It had been a few years. Would their friend have changed much? Nancy couldn’t wait to hear all about Susan’s experiences as a park volunteer.

They soon reached the dorm building, which was surrounded by half a dozen small cabins. Nancy parked the car, and the girls got their bags and headed for the front door.

Even though it was late in the day, the air was incredibly hot and humid. Nancy was glad she was wearing her favorite white shorts and a powder blue tank top. Bess was wearing a yellow sundress, and George was wearing denim cutoffs and a red T-shirt. The climate definitely demanded a summery wardrobe.

The girls walked on a path that was made of broken-up seashells. A small, shiny green tree frog hopped across the path, just ahead of them.

“Isn’t it cute?” Bess cried out, pointing to the frog. “Back home, all you ever see in the yard are squirrels.”

“We’re going to see *lots of* stuff while we’re here,” George told her cousin with a grin. “Frogs, lizards, snakes, panthers—plus your good friends, the alligators and the crocodiles.”

“Stop it, you’re just trying to scare me,” Bess protested.

George wiggled her eyebrows. “Okay, whatever. I’m just telling you what I read in my guidebooks.”

Nancy swung open the heavy wooden door to the dorm and went inside. George and Bess followed. They found themselves in a lobby with turquoise-colored walls and white wicker furniture. A big ceiling fan spun around slowly, making a creaking noise. There was a bulletin board covered with official-looking memos and flyers about upcoming events: “Canoe the Wilderness Waterway,” “Backcountry Camping Trip to Shark Valley!”

“Yeah, like anyone’s going to want to go to someplace called Shark Valley,” Bess remarked.

There was no one around. “Helloooo!” Nancy called out. There was no reply.

“Why is this place so deserted?” George said, glancing around. She wandered over to an adjoining room and poked her head in. “Looks like the TV room,” she called out over her shoulder. “No one in here, either.”

Just then Nancy heard the sound of footsteps clattering down the stairs. A woman with a clipboard appeared. She had short, bushy gray hair, and was dressed in khakis and a pale green T-shirt that said Save the Manatees. She wore a pair of tiny gold-rimmed glasses.

“May I help you?” the woman asked with a friendly smile. “I’m Mrs. Fitzgerald, the dorm mother. You girls looking for someone?”

Nancy set her suitcase on the floor. “We’re looking for Susan Bokan. I’m Nancy Drew, and this is Bess Marvin.” She turned and pointed to George, who was still standing in the doorway of the TV room. “And that’s George Fay—”

Before Nancy had a chance to finish her sentence, Mrs. Fitzgerald glanced over at George and let out a piercing scream.



## ***A Mysterious Disappearance***

Mrs. Fitzgerald let out another scream. Her screams sent a chill up Nancy's spine. Nancy didn't understand what was going on. Why would George's presence cause Mrs. Fitzgerald to react that way?

"What is it, Mrs. Fitzgerald? Did you see an alligator or something?" Bess cried out. Bess didn't seem to understand that Mrs. Fitzgerald was screaming at George.

Nancy rushed up to the dorm mother and grabbed her arm. "What's the matter, Mrs. Fitzgerald? What's wrong?" she demanded.

Mrs. Fitzgerald stopped screaming and pointed a trembling finger at George. "Y-you—wh-what are you doing here?" she stammered. "We thought you were—"

She was interrupted by footsteps rushing down the stairs. Nancy glanced up and saw a young woman dressed in khakis and a white T-shirt that said Everglades National Park. Her long, curly red hair was loosely held up in a barrette, and her green eyes were enormous as she stared at Mrs. Fitzgerald, then at Nancy and Bess.

"What on earth is going on?" the woman cried out. "Ohmigosh. Nancy, Bess! Are you all right? Who screamed?"



Nancy stared at the red-haired woman and realized after a second that it was their friend, Susan Bokan. Susan was thinner, and her hair was a lot longer. "Susan!" Nancy exclaimed. "Hi."

"Susan, it's *her*," Mrs. Fitzgerald murmured, pointing at George.

Susan glanced at George. She, too, let out a scream. "Ohmigosh!" she cried out. "I don't believe it!"

Bess clapped her hands over her ears. "Why is everyone screaming?" she demanded.

George was still standing in the doorway of the TV room. She started to walk toward the group, a puzzled expression on her face. "I'm totally confused. Why is everyone screaming at me? What are you guys talking about? I've never met you before, Mrs. Fitzgerald."

Susan's hand flew to her mouth. "Mrs. Fitzgerald, that's *no*ther. That's my friend George Fayne. She and these other girls are visiting me from up north." She laughed nervously.

"Oh, my word," Mrs. Fitzgerald said. She peered at George over the top of her gold-rimmed glasses. "Oh, my word, I guess you're not Jade, after all. You do look so much like her, though."

"Yes, she does," Susan agreed.

Nancy glanced from Mrs. Fitzgerald to George to Susan. "Who's Jade?"

George frowned. "Yeah, who's Jade?"

"I'll explain everything in a sec," Susan said. "First, let's say a proper hello." She walked over and gave Nancy a big bear hug. "Hi, it's so awesome to see you." Then she turned to Bess and George and gave them hugs, too. "George, you've changed since the last time I saw you. I'm sorry I didn't—um, recognize you right away."

"I'm sorry I screamed, girls," Mrs. Fitzgerald piped up. "It's just that George here looks so much like—well, with your hair and everything and your complexion and even your eyes . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Let me get you all something to drink, and we can sit down and catch up," Susan suggested. "I think there's some iced tea in the kitchen. Then we can go over to the cafeteria and grab some dinner."

"Dinner, great," Bess said. She plopped down on the wicker couch and took off her pink rhinestone sunglasses. "All this excitement has given me an appetite!"

"I was just on my way over to the visitors' center," Mrs. Fitzgerald said, holding up her clipboard. "Excuse me, won't you? It was nice meeting you all. I'm sorry about the mix-up." She turned to Susan. "You'll explain everything, won't you?"

"Of course I will, Mrs. Fitzgerald," Susan replied.

Nancy frowned. She was growing more and more curious by the minute. Who *was* this Jade person whom George resembled so much? What was the big mystery about her? Why had Mrs. Fitzgerald and Susan screamed like that?

Mrs. Fitzgerald waved goodbye and headed outside, letting the screen door slam shut behind her. It was starting to get dark. Mosquitoes buzzed against the screen

door. In the distance Nancy could hear the musical twanging of tree frogs and the occasional cry of a bird. She felt as though she were a million miles from River Heights.

“Let me get the iced teas. I’ll be right back,” Susan said.

After she had gone, George turned to Nancy. “What was *that* all about?”

“I guess you look like some girl or whatever,” Bess replied, studying her nails.

“Yeah, but usually, when someone thinks you look like someone else, they say, ‘Hey, you look like someone I know!’ They don’t scream their lungs out,” George pointed out.

“True,” Nancy agreed. “Mrs. Fitzgerald acted as if she had just seen a ghost.”

George nodded. “Susan, too.”

“Okay, no talk about ghosts, we’re on vacation,” Bess protested.

A minute later Susan returned with four glasses of iced tea on a tray, which she put down on the coffee table. Nancy sat down on the couch between Susan and Bess, and George sat in a chair across from them.

“So how was your trip?” Susan asked. “Was the plane ride okay? How was the drive from Miami airport?”

Nancy took a sip of the iced tea. It had sprigs of fresh mint in it. “Mmm, yummy. The plane ride was great. The drive from the airport was long. The park is totally amazing and beautiful.”

“Isn’t it?” Susan said, beaming. “I’m so glad you could make it down. It’s been so long! I hardly recognized you guys.”

Nancy noticed Susan’s glance drifting to George. She leaned toward Susan. “Okay, so tell us,” she insisted. “What’s the story with George and this Jade person? Why did you and Mrs. Fitzgerald scream like that?”

Susan’s smile disappeared. She sighed and leaned back on the couch. There was a long silence, filled only by the creaking of the ceiling fan and the night noises drifting in through the screen door.

“Jade Romero is a volunteer at the park, like me,” Susan began after a moment. “Or she was. People think that—it’s possible that—well, the bottom line is, she may be dead.”

“What!” Bess gasped. She shivered. “This is totally creepy.”

“No wonder you and Mrs. Fitzgerald screamed,” George murmured. “You guys really *did* think you were seeing a ghost.”

Nancy frowned. “Susan, you said that this Jade person *maybe* dead. You’re not sure?”

Susan shook her head. “No, we’re not sure. We’re *pretty* sure, though. It’s a long story.”

“Tell us!” George said.

Susan sighed. “Jade disappeared about a month ago. She went backcountry camping up along Whitewater Bay. Whitewater Bay is just north of here. It’s a pretty good-size body of water that empties into the Gulf.”

“The golf? As in, the sport with little white balls and sticks?” Bess asked her.

Susan smiled. “No, not *that* kind of golf. The Gulf of Mexico. Whitewater Bay has lots of little islands. You get there via the Wilderness Waterway, which is a big, long, ninety-nine-mile canoe trail connecting Flamingo to Everglades City, up north. Whitewater Bay is popular with campers.” Her smile faded. “Anyway, Jade went backcountry camping in those parts and never came back.”

“Backcountry camping,” Nancy repeated. “How is that different from regular old camping?”

“It basically means not camping at an official campsite,” Susan explained. “You take your tent and other equipment and pitch camp wherever you want—on the beach, deep in the wilderness, wherever. Experienced campers like to do this because it’s more challenging, plus you get more privacy that way.”

“Did Jade go with anyone?” Nancy asked Susan.

“Nope, and that’s part of the mystery,” Susan replied. “It’s really, really stupid to go backcountry camping by yourself, especially around here. You know, with all the wild animals and so forth. But she did it, anyway. I woke up one morning and there was a note on my desk.”

“What did the note say?” George asked her.

Susan scrunched up her face. “Let me see if I can remember the exact wording,” she murmured. “It said something like, ‘Heading up to Whitewater Bay to get some peace and quiet. See you in a few days.’ ” She nodded. “Yup, I think that was it.”

Nancy took another sip of her iced tea. She loved solving mysteries, and this one was especially intriguing. Why would Jade, who must have been savvy about the dangers of the Everglades, go backcountry camping by herself? Was it a moment of bad judgment? Or was it something else?

Nancy turned to Susan. "You and Jade were roommates?"

"Yes," Susan said. "So when she didn't come back after a couple of days, I started to get worried. When she didn't come back after a couple more days, I went into all-out panic mode. I told Mrs. Fitzgerald, who told the park rangers and police. There was a massive search for her."

"Did the park rangers or police find any clues?" George asked Susan.

Susan shook her head. "Nope, not a one. They didn't even find her campsite." She paused and swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. "Um, sorry," she said, sniffing. "It still upsets me to think about . . . you know. Anyway, Jade's parents flew in from California. That's where she's from. They helped with the search and even hired private detectives, but they couldn't find her, either."

Nancy pulled a tissue out of her bag and handed it to Susan. "Here. I know this is upsetting for you."

Susan took the tissue and wiped her eyes. "Thanks, Nancy. Anyway, Jade's parents finally had to give up and fly back to California. The official search has been canceled. Everyone's decided that she's probably dead or that she's run away and doesn't want to be found."

Nancy studied Susan's face. Obviously, Susan didn't agree a hundred percent with the people who'd given up on Jade. "What do *you* think?" Nancy asked her friend. "What's

your theory about what happened to her? Do *you* think she's dead? How well did you know her?"

Susan folded the tissue in half, then folded it again. She seemed to be considering something. "I think she's still alive," she said after a moment. "Jade was my good friend as well as my roommate. I knew her, and I don't think she would have gone backcountry camping alone."

She lowered her voice and added, "I have this crazy theory. Like, maybe she was kidnapped. I mean, maybe the kidnapper made her write that note to me, I don't know."

Nancy started. Kidnapping, that's pretty serious stuff, she thought. "Why would anyone have wanted to kidnap Jade?" she said out loud.

"I'm not sure," Susan replied with a shrug. "The thing is . . . she'd been acting kind of strange before she disappeared."

"Strange how?" George asked her.

"Strange like she had a big secret she was keeping from me. From everyone," Susan said. "It's hard to explain. But I'm wondering if maybe Jade had something on somebody."

She leaned forward and added, almost apologetically, "I kind of had an ulterior motive when I asked you guys to come down. I want to try to find Jade, or at least find out what happened to her. Will you help me?"

So that's why Susan was so eager to get us down here, Nancy thought. Her detective's instinct had told her something was up.

Before Nancy had a chance to respond, she was distracted by a noise at the screen door. It was a new noise, one that wasn't made by mosquitoes or tree frogs or birds. She glanced up quickly.

A shadow fell across the doorway. Footsteps crunched the broken seashells as the shadow disappeared.

Someone's been eavesdropping on us! Nancy thought in alarm.





### 3

## *A Chase through the Dark*

The shadow disappeared from the doorway. Nancy knew that someone had been listening to the conversation about Jade. She wondered who it was.

She rose from the wicker couch. “Who’s there?” she called out.

“Nancy, what is it?” Susan asked.

Bess hastily pulled her feet onto the couch and wrapped her arms around her knees. “It’s not an alligator, is it?” she demanded.

There were more footsteps crunching across broken seashells. Without wasting another second, Nancy ran to the screen door and flung it open. A cloud of mosquitoes and tiny no-see-ums rose in the air and buzzed noisily around her head and around the small overhead lamp that lit the doorway.

Nancy brushed the bugs away with one hand while glancing around. Someone—a man?—was running down the seashell path, away from the dorm building. It was too dark to see him clearly, or to tell if it even *was* a man. The short hair and broad, muscular shoulders seemed to indicate that it was, though.

George came up behind Nancy. “Who’s out there?” she whispered.

“Shhh,” Nancy told her, trying to focus on the eavesdropper.

The man cut a sharp left off the path and disappeared into a grove of palm trees. “You guys stay here!” Nancy whispered to George. “If I’m not back in fifteen minutes, come looking for me.”

“But—” George protested.

Before George could stop her, Nancy took off after the man.

Nancy turned left into the palm tree grove. Pumping her arms, she sprinted as fast as she could, which was quite fast. She jogged several times a week at home, and she was a natural sprinter. At that moment she put everything she had into chasing the eavesdropper.

It wasn’t easy, though. The ground felt soft and slightly swampy, and her sneakers kept squishing in the mud, getting sucked under. Even with the rising moon, it was hard to see in the ever-increasing darkness. The palm trees were tall and densely packed, creating a natural canopy that prevented most of the moonlight from shining through.

The man was getting farther and farther ahead of her. He obviously knew the area and terrain better than she did.

A branch whacked her in the face. “Ow!” Nancy cried out, but after ducking under the branch, she kept on going. Her right cheek stung, but she ignored the pain.

The woods seemed to grow eerier by the minute. The man was leading Nancy away from the village complex, where there were buildings and lights and people, and deeper into the darkness, into the wilderness of the Everglades.

She neared a small body of water. Was it a swamp? An inlet? Along its shore were big, gnarled trees with big, gnarled roots. Mangroves, Nancy thought, remembering pictures of them from the guidebooks. They were especially creepy looking in the dark. With their roots curving and crawling out of the ground, they seemed almost able to move. She had to take care not to trip over them.

Abruptly Nancy heard a terrible, piercing scream. She stopped in her tracks, feeling the blood drain from her face.

“Hello?” she whispered. “Anyone there?”

There was no reply. After a minute she decided that the scream had come from an animal, not a human. She wondered what kind of animal could make a sound like that. A panther? she asked herself, and shuddered. She knew that there were panthers in the Everglades.

Come on, Drew, snap out of it, she told herself.

She took a couple of deep breaths to restore her focus and started running again. Her sneakers were totally covered with muck, and each step was slippery, precarious. Where did the man go? she wondered. She didn’t see him up ahead.

Nancy slowed and glanced around, squinting into the darkness. She was aware of the cool, humid evening air, the symphony of insect and frog noises, and the smell of the brackish water from Florida Bay, close by.

There was a rustling in some nearby bushes. Nancy bit back a startled cry. Whatever had made the sound was small, too small to be the man. Nancy kept searching.

A twig snapped. Nancy spun around, trying to follow the direction of the sound. All she could hear were insects and frogs.

After a moment she let out a sigh of frustration. The man was gone, and it was useless for her to continue searching without a flashlight—and some backup.

She turned around and headed back toward the dorm, hoping she could find it in the dark. She tried to feel for broken branches under her feet and use her intuitive sense of direction to lead her back toward civilization. She didn't like being in the palm tree grove alone.

After a bit, Nancy could make out—through the overhead palm fronds—a couple of dimly lit windows in the distance. She sped up. Soon she could make out more windows, and the outlines of Susan's dorm and the surrounding cabins.

When she got close to the place where the man had veered off into the palm grove, Nancy bent down and searched for footprints. She could make out several different kinds: a sneaker with a striped tread, which was probably hers, and another sneaker with a more deeply textured tread. That footprint was larger than hers and wider, which seemed to indicate that it belonged to a man.

Just then something else caught her eye. Lying on the ground near the seashell path was a small silver object. It glinted dully in a thin sliver of moonlight.

Nancy picked up the object and wiped the mud off it with the hem of her tank top. It was an oddly shaped key chain

with a single key on it.

Nancy frowned. Had the eavesdropper dropped it? Was this a key to the dorm? She walked over to the doorway, swung open the screen door, and jiggled the key in the lock of the main door. It didn't work.

Nancy heard footsteps on the other side of the door. "Who's there?" someone asked.

Nancy recognized Bess's voice. She smiled and pushed on the door.

Bess was just about to scream, until she saw Nancy. Bess's hands flew to her hips. "Where have you been?" she demanded. "We were worried sick. Where did you go?"

Susan came up behind Bess. "Come in before the mosquitoes get you, Nancy," she said, sounding concerned.

"I think they already did," Nancy said, rubbing the itchy pink welts on her arms.

She walked inside, and Susan closed both doors after her. Nancy glanced around the brightly lit room with its cozy wicker furniture and pretty turquoise walls. She was glad to be back.

"Are you okay?" George asked her. "Your feet and legs are covered with mud."

"I'm fine," Nancy said. She glanced down at her feet and legs. George was right—she *was* a mess.

"We almost went after you with flashlights," Susan told Nancy.

“Well, *some of* us almost went after you with flashlights,” George corrected Susan.

Nancy sat down on the wicker couch. Susan walked over to a large potted plant with thick swordlike leaves and snapped off a leaf. Then she went over to where Nancy was sitting and began rubbing the leaf across her arms.

The leaf oozed a clear, cool liquid that coated her skin. “What are you doing?” Nancy asked Susan. She touched her arms. They were sticky. “What is that stuff, anyway?”

“Aloe, for your mosquito bites,” Susan explained. “You’ll like it, it’s very soothing.”

“Okay, spill,” Bess demanded. “Where did you go? Who was that guy? Did you catch him?”

Nancy took a deep breath and told Bess, George, and Susan the entire story. When she had finished, she turned to Susan and said, “Do you have any idea who that guy might have been? If it *was* a guy, that is. I’m not a hundred percent sure.”

Susan shook her head. “No idea. I didn’t see him. Did you catch his hair color or anything like that?”

“No,” Nancy said. “Whoever he was, he was listening in on our conversation about Jade.”

“That is so spooky,” Bess said, shuddering. “I wonder why he’s interested in Jade?”

“Kidnappers, eavesdroppers—this could be intense,” George remarked.

“I don’t know why the guy was so interested in what we had to say about Jade. But if he eavesdrops on us again, I plan to find out,” Nancy said firmly.

Then she remembered the silver key chain. She held it up in the air. “Susan, do you recognize this, by any chance?”

Susan stared at the key chain and frowned. “No. It’s not mine, anyway.”

“What’s up with the weird shape?” Bess asked, pointing to the top part of the key chain. “It looks like a lightning bolt.”

“Kind of looks like a country,” George observed. “Or maybe a state.”

“A state!” Nancy turned the key chain over in the palm of her hand. “George, you’re brilliant! This is the state of California, and”—she paused and turned to Susan—“and Jade is from California, right?”

Susan gasped. “Right.” She grabbed the key chain from Nancy. Then she pulled a key out of her pocket and held it up against the muddy key.

“This is the key to our room,” Susan announced. “Which means that this is definitely Jade’s key chain. Whoever was eavesdropping on us had Jade’s room key.”

“Could it have been Jade herself?” Nancy asked Susan.

Susan’s eyes widened. “You mean—you think *Jade* might have dropped it? But why would she eavesdrop on us? If she’s alive, why wouldn’t she let us all know?”



"This is getting way, way too weird," Bess said with a shudder.

Early morning sun streamed through the gauzy curtains and flooded the cabin bedroom with light. Nancy stirred and rubbed her eyes. She blinked sleepily at the travel alarm clock on her nightstand.

"What time is it?" George mumbled from her bed, which was across the room.

"Ten after seven," Nancy replied.

Bess, whose bed was right next to George's, pulled her covers over her head. "Way too early," came her muffled voice. "Going back to sleep now. G'night."

Nancy smiled. Typical Bess, she thought.

Nancy propped a couple of pillows behind her back and sat up. She stretched lazily. Despite the fact that she was in a strange place, she had slept well.

The cabin was simple but comfortable. It was casually furnished, with the three beds and a table and chairs and a couple of old lamps. The only decorations were a copy of an eighteenth-century map of the Everglades and a framed photo of a manatee, which looked like a cross between a hippopotamus and a whale. There was a small living room off the bedroom.

Susan had arranged for the three girls to stay in the cabin. It was convenient, because the dorm was just fifty feet away.

Nancy noticed just then that there was a broom propped up against Bess's nightstand. "Um, Bess? What's up with the broom?"

Bess's blond head popped out from beneath the covers. "Isn't it obvious? To protect us from alligators. In case one gets into our cabin."

George chuckled. "The alligators would have had to knock first, Miss Scaredy-cat. Our door was locked."

"Better safe than sorry," Bess explained. She rearranged her pillows, then nestled deeper under her covers. "Anyway, I'm going back to sleep. I don't know about you guys, but I couldn't sleep last night. It was so *loud* outside, with all those animals and bugs making all that racket. Plus, it was hard to relax knowing that . . . that weirdo eavesdropper was out there somewhere. I mean, what if he's the one who kidnapped Susan's friend Jade?"

"~~If~~ Jade was kidnapped," Nancy reminded her. "We don't know for sure yet."

"Or what if it was Jade herself?" Bess added. "In a way, that's even weirder."

George sat up in her bed. "I just thought of something. Did you say ten after seven, Nancy? Didn't we tell Susan we'd meet her at seven-thirty?"

"Oh my gosh, yes!" Nancy exclaimed. "Come on, Bess, get up. We've got to meet Susan for breakfast in twenty minutes."

"Did someone say breakfast?" Bess flung her covers off and jumped out of bed. "Last one dressed is a rotten egg!"

The cafeteria was crowded with park employees and volunteers eating breakfast. As Nancy, Bess, and George walked in, they were greeted by the delicious aroma of coffee, eggs, and bacon.

Nancy had dressed quickly in denim cutoffs and a pink T-shirt. Bess had put on white shorts and a yellow top, and George was wearing khaki shorts and a red tank top.

The three girls went through the line, piling their trays with granola, yogurt, muffins, and fresh fruit. Nancy noticed the same thing happening that had happened at dinner the night before. George got a lot of curious stares from the park employees and volunteers. Obviously, people noticed the resemblance between her and Jade Romero.

They found Susan sitting at one of the tables by the window, working on a plate of French toast and fresh mango slices. The window overlooked the bay, which was dotted with sailboats and fishing boats. Susan was dressed in her park volunteer outfit.

"Hey, good morning," Susan called out. "Did you guys sleep well?"

"Some of us did," Nancy said, grinning at Bess. "And you?"

"Like a rock," Susan replied. "I've been working super-hard lately. Plus, I've been training for a triathlon. So getting to sleep at night is no problem for me!"

Nancy and her friends set down their trays on the table and sat down. Nancy took a sip of orange juice, then said, "Susan, about Jade's disappearance. How do you want us to go about getting to the bottom of it?"

"I'm all tapped out of ideas," Susan admitted. "What do you think we should do, Nancy?"

"Maybe we could start out by talking to other park volunteers who worked with her," Nancy suggested. "And how about her friends? Did she have any here, besides you?"

"Not too many," Susan replied. "Jade was kind of shy, she kind of kept to herself. There *was* one guy, though."

Susan glanced around the room, looking for someone. After a minute she said, "There he is! Jade's boyfriend. Or he *was*, whatever. Let me introduce you."

Susan waved to a dark-haired guy who was just getting up from a table across the room. She gestured for him to come over.

While the guy was walking over, Susan leaned across the table and whispered, "I was thinking, Nancy. About that key chain. I can't believe it was Jade who was eavesdropping on us. That just doesn't make sense."

"If it wasn't Jade, it was someone who had her key," Nancy pointed out. "And either she gave it to the person or the person stole it from her." She added, "Still, we can't rule out the fact that she may have dropped it, either last night or at some other time. Maybe even before she disappeared."

"Hey, did you want me?"

Nancy glanced up. The guy Susan had called over was standing at their table. Nancy saw that he was really cute, with curly dark brown hair and blue eyes. He was dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt.

He glanced at Nancy and Bess, then his gaze stopped at George. His jaw dropped. "I—I don't understand," he stammered. "Susan, is this some kind of a joke? Because if it is, I don't appreciate it."

"I know, the resemblance is uncanny, isn't it?" Susan said to him, smiling softly. "Obviously it's not Jade, though. It's my friend George Fayne. And this is Nancy Drew and Bess Marvin. They're visiting from up north."

"Wow" was all the guy could manage, still staring at George.

"Girls, this is Griffin Carey. He's a fellow park volunteer, and he's training to be a ranger." Susan turned to Griffin. "Nancy and her friends are going to help me—help *us*—try to find Jade. Nancy has a lot of experience solving mysteries."

Before Griffin had a chance to respond, Nancy said, "You might be able to answer some questions for us, Griffin."

Griffin frowned. "Questions? About what?"

"About Jade," Nancy explained. "Like, how was she acting around the time she disappeared?"

"D-disappeared?" Griffin repeated dumbly.

"Do you have any idea what might have happened to her?" George spoke up.

"Nancy's a *super* detective," Bess said with a smile. "If anyone can find Jade, it's her!"

Griffin's face began turning red. He clenched his hands into fists. "I can't believe you're asking these questions!" he exploded all of a sudden. "Jade is dead. She didn't

‘disappear,’ she’s D-E-A-D, *dead*. Let her rest in peace and drop your crazy investigation!”



## 4

### *A Strange Clue*

“Did you hear me? I said, drop your crazy investigation!” Griffin repeated.

Nancy stared at Griffin. He was furious, acting as if he was going to start throwing things.

Nancy was really taken aback. Why had he reacted this way? she wondered. She would have thought that Griffin would be happy to have the case “reopened,” so to speak.

Bess smiled nervously at Griffin. “I think you’ve got us all wrong. We’re trying to help.”

Griffin whirled around and glared at her. Nancy decided that asking him more questions about Jade would not be a good idea, at least for the moment.

“Look, Griffin. I’m sorry, we didn’t mean to upset you—” Nancy began.

Then Griffin seemed to come out of it. He shook his head quickly and even managed a sheepish smile. “I’m sorry; it’s my fault. I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

“It’s *my* fault, Griffin. I should have explained sooner. See, I invited Nancy and her friends to come down here. I was hoping they’d help me look for Jade,” Susan said.



Griffin glanced at her. Then he turned to Nancy. “No, really, I shouldn’t have reacted like that. It’s just that . . . well, since Jade died . . . I haven’t been myself. I don’t know if Susan mentioned it to you, but Jade was my girlfriend.”

“You don’t have to answer this question. But why are you so sure she died?” Nancy asked him.

Griffin’s smile disappeared. His eyes filled with tears. He brushed them away with the back of his hand. “Some people are saying she ran away and didn’t want anyone to find her. That’s totally wrong. She had absolutely no reason to run away—*none*. She was happy here, she was happy with her life.”

“Then what do you think happened to her?” Nancy asked him gently.

“What happened was, she went backcountry camping alone,” Griffin replied. “Not the smartest move in the world, I’ll grant you, but she had a mind of her own, and you couldn’t talk her out of something once she’d decided on it. And while she was camping, she must have—something terrible must have happened to her. The Wilderness Waterway is very tough canoeing. And it’s full of stingrays, sharks, alligators.”

He turned his head away and dabbed at his eyes again. He clearly couldn’t go on talking about Jade.

Bess’s eyes filled with tears, too. “That is so *awful*,” she murmured, sniffing. She broke a cranberry muffin in half and started munching on it. “So awful. Griffin, you must be totally heartbroken. Here, have a muffin.” She extended the other half of the cranberry muffin to him.

Griffin shook his head. "No, thanks. But you're right, Bess, I feel totally heartbroken. Which is why I lost my temper a minute ago. I really, really apologize."

Griffin fixed his eyes on Nancy. "Still, I meant what I said. You should drop this investigation. You need to let Jade rest in peace, and you can't put the people who cared about her through more pain and heartache."

"Do you think Griffin is hiding something?" Nancy asked Susan.

It was after breakfast, and the four girls were taking a walk along Florida Bay. They were on a wooden boardwalk that was bordered on one side by massive mangrove trees. Sunlight shimmered on the water, and dozens of fishing boats dotted the horizon. Seagulls, pelicans, and great blue herons swooped through the air and dove into the briny waves, doing some fishing of their own.

"*Hiding something?* Nancy, he's grieving for his lost love!" Bess protested.

Susan adjusted her green baseball cap and frowned at Nancy. "I'm not sure I understand your question. You mean, about Jade? Why would Griffin hide anything about Jade?"

"Did the two of them get along?" Nancy asked Susan. "Did they fight a lot? Was she planning to break up with him or anything?"

George stared at Nancy. "Are you thinking *Griffin* might have had something to do with her disappearance, Nancy?"

Nancy shrugged. "Anytime anyone starts telling me to 'drop the investigation,' I get a little suspicious. That's all."

Susan looked thoughtful. “Jade and Griffin got along fine. They’d been dating for six months, something like that. I think she was planning to invite him to go to California with her, to meet her parents. So it was pretty serious.”

She added, “I don’t know, Nancy. From what I can tell, Griffin is a nice guy. I can’t believe he had anything to do with what happened to Jade.”

The four girls continued down the boardwalk. They passed a park ranger leading a group of high school students on a walking tour. “Male alligators can grow to sixteen feet in length,” she was saying to the students.

“Just what I needed to hear,” Bess muttered to Nancy.

Nancy smiled, but her mind was on Jade. She tried to sort out her thoughts about Griffin. It was weird that he had insisted that the investigation be dropped—on the other hand, Nancy had no reason to think that he was guilty of foul play.

As they walked, Susan pointed out various trees and plants, like mahoganies, bromeliads, and orchids.

“See that tree over there?” Susan said, pointing to a short, slender tree. “That’s a gumbo-limbo. The nickname for it is the tourist tree, ’cause it has a red, peeling bark.”

Bess frowned in confusion. “Huh? Run that by me again?”

Susan laughed. “You know, like tourists who come to Florida and don’t wear enough sunscreen and get real bad sunburns.”

“Oh, I get it,” Bess said, nodding. “Well, in case anyone is wondering, *this* tourist brought lots of sunscreen. SPF fifteen,

SPF thirty, SPF forty-five, you name it."

Just then Nancy noticed a nest of baby birds cradled in the branches of a red mangrove. "What kind of birds are those?" she asked Susan.

"Ospreys." Susan smiled wistfully. "It's sad. The Everglades used to have hundreds, even thousands of native species. Now, in part because of the shopping malls and housing complexes and other buildings that have gone up around the edges, the park has all sorts of terrible problems. We're losing birds, animals, fish, insects, and plants faster than we can count them. We have water management issues, pollution . . ."

"You mean, cute little birds like that are becoming extinct?" Bess asked, staring at the osprey nest.

"Not just birds but all sorts of other creatures, too," Susan said.

"That's awful," George agreed.

"Is something being done about that?" Nancy asked Susan.

"We're all trying to do what we can. But a lot of the damage has already been done," Susan explained.

Half an hour later the girls came to the end of their walking loop, and Susan had to report for work in a few minutes. George wanted to go for a run around Eco Pond, which was a well-known bird habitat.

Bess wanted to go for a swim. "So. Where are the good beaches around here?" she asked Susan. "I'm not too picky.

I just want a smooth patch of sand, preferably white, where I can read magazines and watch cute guys play volleyball.”

Susan chuckled. “There isn’t any beach, unless you want to swim with the alligators and the sharks.”

“I don’t~~think~~so!” Bess exclaimed. “I think I’ll spend the morning in the gift shop instead.” She turned to Nancy. “Want to come with me? We can buy souvenirs for your dad and Hannah and my parents. And maybe some postcards.” Hannah was the Drew family’s housekeeper. She had helped Carson Drew take care of Nancy since Nancy’s mother died, fifteen years earlier.

“No thanks,” Nancy said. “I have something else I need to do. Susan, can I have the key to your room? Or could I go ahead and use Jade’s key? I want to do some digging around.”

Susan laughed. “Why? To go through my closet to investigate my fashion situation?”

Nancy grinned and shook her head. “Nope. I want to go through Jade’s stuff for clues.”

\* \* \*

An hour later Nancy was just finishing up with the first box of Jade’s personal effects. Susan had packed them up into two cardboard boxes, planning to send them back to Mr. and Mrs. Romero in California.

Susan and Jade’s room was large and sunny, with white wicker furniture. On the walls were watercolor paintings of various spots in the Everglades, including the Northwest Cape, Ten Thousand Islands, and the Noble Hammock Canoe Trail. The window was open, letting in a cool, salty

breeze from Florida Bay. Nancy could hear seagulls shrieking and squawking in the distance.

On top of Jade's now-empty desk was a framed photograph of her and Griffin standing arm in arm in front of a sailboat. Nancy had been stunned when she saw it. Jade really *did* look a lot like George. Like George, Jade had short, curly dark brown hair, brown eyes, and an athletic build. Jade was almost as tall as Griffin, who was fairly tall for a guy.

Nancy had come across all sorts of things in the first box of Jade's belongings: dog-eared paperback books, hiking guides, old calendars, printouts of e-mails, letters, and clippings from magazines.

There was a lot of e-mail to and from Griffin. Nancy felt uncomfortable about reading them since they were personal and romantic in nature, so she had scanned them quickly. She wanted to make sure they didn't contain anything that might be related to Jade's disappearance. They didn't.

In the box Nancy had also come across brochures, newsletters, and other literature about the Everglades. There was an article describing the search for Native American artifacts within the park boundaries. There was another article about all the species that had become extinct within the park.

But, nothing seemed to be a clue to Jade's disappearance.

Nancy stuffed the articles about the Everglades into her backpack. She wanted to read them later, so she could learn more about the Everglades.

Nancy set the first box aside and turned to the second. Her legs were getting cramped, so she changed position. Then she started digging through the second box.

“Let’s see if *this* box has anything interesting,” she said out loud to herself.

After a few minutes she came across a folder of Jade’s bank records.

“Checking account, no savings account,” Nancy noted, glancing through the statements.

From what Nancy could tell, Jade seemed to have been pretty strapped for cash. Did that mean anything? Or was it just a mundane fact about Jade’s life that was unrelated to her disappearance? It was hard to know.

Just then Nancy noticed a crumpled-up piece of paper wedged between two of the bank statements. She pulled it out and smoothed it.

On the paper was a single handwritten word: PANTERA. It was written in red marker in big capital letters. It had been underlined several times, as if it was very important.

Maybe this is a clue! Nancy thought excitedly.





## ***A Visit with the Drakes***

Nancy stared at the single word on the piece of paper. *Pantera*. Was it someone's name? Was it a foreign word? What did it mean?

She closed her eyes and tried to think. Take the word apart, she told herself.

*Pan*. She knew there were words like *pantheism* and *Pan-Asian*, in which the prefix *pan* meant "all."

*Tera*. She knew the word *terra* had something to do with land. All land. The problem was, the *tera* in *pantera* had only one *r*.

"Hey, how's it going?"

Nancy's eyes flew open. Susan was standing in the doorway, baseball cap in hand.

"I'm on my way over to check out one of the campgrounds," Susan explained, stepping into the room. "I thought I'd stop by to see if you'd found anything."

"Do you know what the word *pantera* means?" Nancy asked her.

"Pantera, pantera . . ." Susan hesitated. "I don't know. Sounds Spanish, though."

Nancy handed the crumpled piece of paper to her friend. "Is this Jade's handwriting?"

Susan studied the piece of paper. "Uh-huh. Did you find it in one of the boxes?"

"Yup."

"That's funny, I didn't notice it before." Susan sat down cross-legged on the floor, next to Nancy. "Hey, I just had a totally brilliant thought! There's a company based in Miami called the Panterra Corporation. Two's, I think, not one. It's run by a couple named Bill and Ellen—no, *Esther*—Drake. They're developers."

Nancy's blue eyes lit up. "Developers? As in, they build buildings?"

"Uh-huh," Susan replied. "The Drakes specialize in building huge housing, office, and shopping complexes. Their work has been really controversial, because a lot of it is on the outskirts of the Everglades. People have accused them of contributing to the destruction of the park."

"Really?" Nancy said eagerly.

"I think the Drakes are planning on building a new complex of some sort," Susan went on. "I remember Jade talking about it. Of course it's very controversial—as always."

Nancy nodded, trying to process this new information. Her mind was racing. How much had Jade known about the new Panterra project? Was there a link between the project and Jade's disappearance?

“Susan, did Jade know the Drakes, by any chance?” Nancy said out loud.

Susan shrugged. “I’m not sure. I kind of doubt it. People like Jade and me don’t run in the same circle as the Drakes.”

Nancy and Susan talked about the Drakes for a few more minutes. Then Nancy switched to another subject.

“Do you know anything about Jade’s finances?” Nancy asked Susan. “I found some of her bank records, and she didn’t seem to have much money.”

“We’re volunteers,” Susan said with a grin. “None of us have money.”

Nancy laughed. “That’s a good point.”

After a while Susan got up to go back to work. Nancy said goodbye, then went back to work herself. She had a lot to do, now that she had a clue to go on. Panterra. Maybe Jade’s trail wasn’t too cold, after all.

\* \* \*

Nancy found a Miami phone directory in the lobby of the dorm and brought it out to the cabin she shared with George and Bess. George was still out on her jog, and Bess wasn’t back from her gift shop expedition yet.

Nancy sat cross-legged on her bed and propped the phone book open. Through the open window, she could hear the sounds of people laughing and trampling through the palm tree grove, next to the cabin. It reminded her of her adventure the night before, chasing the eavesdropper in the darkness.

Nancy smiled. She and her friends had barely arrived at the Everglades before she'd gotten herself knee-deep in a mystery!

Nancy flipped through the pages of the phone book and found the phone number for the Panterra Corporation. Then she reached for the phone and dialed the number.

After a few rings a crisp male voice answered: "Panterra Corporation, how may I direct your call?" In the background, Nancy could hear other phones ringing.

"Hi, could I speak to Bill Drake, please?" Nancy said. She figured that if Mr. Drake wasn't available, she could turn around and ask for his wife.

"Bill Drake. That's extension five-seventeen. The line is busy. Let me see if his assistant can help you."

While the receptionist put Nancy through, Nancy picked up a pencil and noted Bill Drake's extension on a piece of paper. A few seconds later a female voice picked up.

"Bill and Esther Drake's office. This is Sandy speaking, may I help you?" she said. She sounded breathless and harried.

Nancy tried to make herself sound as businesslike and official as possible. "Good morning, is Mr. Drake there, please?"

"Who's calling?"

Nancy hesitated for half a second before saying, "Nancy Drew." There was no reason for her not to use her real name.

There was a brief silence on the other end of the phone. Then Sandy said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Drake isn't available right now. May I take a message?"

"How about Mrs. Drake?" Nancy asked her.

"She isn't available, either. Is there a message?" Sandy sounded impatient now.

"No, no message. I'll try again later. Thank you for your help, Sandy."

Nancy sighed and hung up the phone. Now what? she wondered.

Then an idea came to her. A slow smile spread across her face. If she couldn't talk to the Drakes on the phone, maybe she could talk to them in person!

She jumped up from the bed and walked over to her closet. If she was going to pay the Drakes a visit, she had to get all the details right.

"We just left Miami yesterday," Bess complained to Nancy. "Why are we going back? I was going to spend the afternoon catching up on my reading. I'm suffering from a serious fashion magazine backlog."

She, Nancy, and George were in their rental car. The Miami skyline loomed ahead, consisting of skyscrapers and high-rise condos. It was just before noon, and the midday sun blazed brightly in the clear sky.

Nancy was behind the wheel. She turned briefly and smiled at Bess, who was sitting next to her. "I told you. We're paying a little visit to the Panterra Corporation." She

paused and added, "Well, I am, anyway. I have another job for you and George."

"Another job? You didn't tell us *that*," George piped up from the backseat.

"I'm going to drop you guys off at the public library to do some research on the Panterra Corporation," Nancy explained.

"Research? What kind of research?" Bess asked her. She reached over and turned on the radio. A Cuban jazz instrumental was playing. She started clicking her fingers and swaying back and forth. "Hey, this radio station is awesome!"

"I need whatever information you can find on Panterra," Nancy replied. "Especially stuff having to do with controversial building projects, the Everglades park system, et cetera, et cetera."

"Hmm," Bess said. "By the way, speaking of fashion magazines. Nancy, you look great! Why are you so dressed up?"

Nancy glanced down at what she was wearing. She had spent some time picking out the perfect outfit for her visit to the Drakes: a navy blue linen skirt, a button-down white blouse, and dark brown leather sandals.

"I'm dressing to impress," Nancy said simply. "I'm not sure I could get past the receptionist in my shorts and T-shirt," she added with a chuckle.

"Good point," George agreed.

A few minutes later they reached one of the branches of the Miami public library. The girls made arrangements to meet at a nearby restaurant for a late lunch. Then Nancy dropped George and Bess off at the curb.

“Stick to business, okay? No fashion magazines!” Nancy called to Bess out the window.

Bess saluted Nancy. “Yes, boss!”

Nancy laughed, then she continued down the street. As she drove she glanced at a piece of paper with the directions Susan had given her. She also admired the pretty hotels and restaurants that had been built in the Art Deco style from the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. They were pastel colored—yellow, pink, light blue—and had lots of chrome designs.

The Panterra corporate offices were only a few blocks from the library. In contrast to the Art Deco buildings, the Panterra building was modern. It was all glass and metal, and reflected the vast blue of the sky.

There was an enormous fountain at the front in the shape of a skyscraper. Just behind the building was a wide, beautiful strip of beachfront. Two men in dark suits were standing near the water, talking on cell phones.

Nancy parked the rental car and got out. As she walked from the parking lot to the front door, the two men watched her. Nancy was also aware of security cameras following her every move. They were small and discreetly hidden in the palm trees and flowering shrubs and other landscaping. But Nancy’s trained eye missed nothing.

What’s up with all the security? she wondered curiously.

Nancy took off her sunglasses, tucked them into her purse, and headed inside. The lobby was large and modern, and decorated with black-and-silver furniture. A man was sitting at the reception desk, behind which hung the words Panterra Corporation in big silver letters. The logo consisted of an image of the planet Earth with a silver skyscraper in the middle of it.

“Can I help you?” the receptionist asked Nancy. Nancy recognized his voice as the one who’d answered the phone earlier.

“I’m here to see Mrs. Drake,” Nancy said, improvising quickly. She pretended to check her watch. “I’m ten minutes late. Gosh, I feel *awful*,” she groaned.

The man gave her a sympathetic look. “Penthouse floor, go on up. It’s the last office on the right. Just ask for Sandy.”

Oh, great, Nancy thought, remembering the crabby woman she’d talked to earlier. I have to deal with Sandy.

“Thanks so much!” she said as she headed for the elevator.

Once on the penthouse floor, Nancy made her way slowly down the hall. Unlike the exterior of the building and the modern lobby, the penthouse floor was decorated in subdued earth tones and furnished with dark wood, handcrafted pieces. There were posters and photographs on the walls depicting Florida nature scenes: forests, swamps, rivers, manatees, alligators, and birds.

There were half a dozen people working at computers, but none of them glanced up at her. Phones were ringing everywhere. It was obviously a very busy place.



At the end of the hall, Nancy saw a desk outside a corner office. A young woman sitting in a green swivel chair was talking on the phone. She had blond hair pulled back in a ponytail and was wearing an expensive-looking black suit.

When Nancy got a little closer to the blond woman's desk, she stopped. She bent down, pretending to adjust the strap on her sandal. At the same time, she tried to eavesdrop on the woman's conversation.

"This is Sandy from Mr. and Mrs. Drake's office, I want to talk to Robert right this second," Nancy heard the woman say. "Robert, is that you? Why wasn't that package messengered over to the *Herald* this morning? *What?* What do you mean? I dropped it off myself *hours ago*."

There was a silence. Nancy continued fiddling with her sandal.

After a moment Sandy said, "Fine, I'm coming right down. Stay there, don't move. If that package isn't found, Robert, you're dead meat! Eloise in Public Relations is gonna have a fit. We've been getting hammered with bad press lately, you *know* that."

Sandy slammed the phone down. She got up from her desk and marched down the hall. She passed Nancy just as Nancy was rising to her feet. Sandy didn't even seem to notice her.

Nancy glanced over her shoulder. Sandy rushed into the elevator just as the doors were closing. Without wasting another second, Nancy headed down the hall to the office just beyond Sandy's desk.

Actually, there were two offices. The office on the left was empty, but the office on the right was not.

Nancy stood in the doorway of that office and peered in. An attractive older woman, probably in her fifties, was sitting behind a huge mahogany desk. She was dressed in a pale pink silk dress that complemented her short, gray-black hair.

The woman was signing something with an ornate silver fountain pen. Nancy knocked lightly on the door. "Hi. Mrs. Drake?"

The woman glanced up. "Yes, that's me. What can I do for you?" Her voice was friendly.

"I hope I'm not intruding. Eloise in Public Relations sent me up," Nancy fibbed. "I'm a reporter for the . . ."

Nancy hesitated. She needed to make up the name of a local newspaper. She couldn't use a real paper, since Mrs. Drake might call to check her credentials.

"The, um, *Everglades City Beacon*," Nancy said after a minute. "I was assigned to do a story on your latest project."

Mrs. Drake started. "You mean Manatee Commons? Or one of our smaller projects? We have so many."

"Yes, Manatee Commons." I hope that's the right one, Nancy thought. "I'm here to get *your* side of the story, Mrs. Drake," she went on. "I know there's been some controversy, and I think the public deserves to hear the developers' perspective."

Mrs. Drake's face softened. She smiled at Nancy. "That is so refreshing to hear, Ms.—what did you say your name

was?"

"Drew. Nancy Drew."

"Sit down, Nancy." Mrs. Drake indicated a white leather-and-chrome chair.

"You know, I can see why the public gets upset about new development," Mrs. Drake began. "*Of course* they're concerned about the environment, about endangered species, about southern Florida's water supply. What the public doesn't understand is, the Panterra Corporation is just as concerned as they are! That's why we at Panterra do all the impact studies necessary for each and every project. That way, we can design our projects accordingly and nip any problems in the bud!"

Nancy sat down and pulled a pen and notepad out of her purse. She began scribbling down what Mrs. Drake was saying. She didn't understand all of it, but she could ask Susan about it later. Plus, she had to look like a real reporter. "Tell me more about Manatee Commons, Mrs. Drake," she said with a smile.

"It's a *wonderful* project, Tracy," Mrs. Drake gushed. "It's going to be a million-acre shopping mall. Multistory, with shops and restaurants and a day-care facility so moms and dads can drop off their little ones while they shop. We at Panterra *care* about families!"

"Why are you calling it Manatee Commons?" Nancy asked her.

"We're naming it Manatee Commons in honor of the great manatee, which inhabits the Everglades and other parts of Florida," Mrs. Drake explained. "Because you see,

we at Panterra *care* about wildlife. Are you getting all this down, Tracy?"

"Uh-huh," Nancy said, scribbling furiously.

While she was writing, Nancy tried to think of a way to segue the conversation to Jade Romero. She *had* to find out if there was a connection between Jade's disappearance and the new Panterra project.

I could just come right out and ask Mrs. Drake if she knows Jade, Nancy thought. Or I could lie and pretend that Jade called me about Manatee Commons.

After a minute Nancy decided to go for option number two. She stopped writing and glanced up at Mrs. Drake.

"By the way, Mrs. Drake, a woman called me about a month ago about Manatee Commons," she fibbed. "Maybe you know her, her name is Ja—"

Nancy was interrupted by a loud, booming male voice. "Esther, did you forget all about the meeting? You're keeping a roomful of lawyers waiting. Come on!"

Nancy's head shot up. A man was standing in the doorway. He was wearing a light gray suit that complemented his very tall, very broad-shouldered physique. He had a deep tan, white hair, and piercing blue eyes.

"Oh, hello, Bill," Mrs. Drake said cheerfully. "I'll just be a minute. Ask the nice lawyers to wait, will you?"

Nancy realized that the man must be Bill Drake. Mr. Drake glanced from his wife to Nancy and back to his wife again. "Who's this?"

“Darling, this very nice young reporter Tracy is here to talk to us about Manatee Commons,” Mrs. Drake explained. “She writes for the *Homestead Heron*. Or was it the *Biscayne Banner*?”

“It’s the *Everglades City Beacon*,” Nancy explained, smiling at Bill Drake.

“Yes, well, whatever.” Mrs. Drake waved her hands dismissively. “Anyway, Tracy, this is my husband, Bill Drake —”

“Never mind the social niceties, Esther,” Mr. Drake snapped. He turned to Nancy and glared suspiciously at her. “You’re not really a reporter, are you? I know every newspaper in southern Florida. And there’s no such newspaper as the *Everglades City Beacon*!”



## ***Danger on the Road***

Mr. Drake continued glaring at Nancy, waiting for an explanation. Oh, no. Mr. Drake is onto me! Nancy thought.

Nancy's mind raced as she tried to figure out a way out of this dilemma. It was just her luck that Mr. Drake knew the names of all the southern Florida newspapers.

Now what? she thought frantically.

"Dearest, you cannot talk to people like that!" Mrs. Drake scolded her husband.

She turned to Nancy with a sheepish look. "I apologize for my husband, Tracy. Obviously he got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning."

Nancy took a deep breath in order to regain her composure. She plastered a big, fake smile on her face.

"It's no problem, Mrs. Drake," she said pleasantly. She turned to Mr. Drake. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Drake. I'm Nancy Drew. And, yes, I *am* a reporter. As I explained to your wife, I'm doing a piece for the *Everglades City Beacon*. You may not have heard of it yet. It's a small independently owned paper. Some friends of my father's just started it."

Nancy added, "They asked me to do a story on Manatee Commons. Specifically, they asked me to get *your* side of the

story.”

“Nancy—Tracy—I am *sobad* with names,” Mrs. Drake cried out. She turned to her husband. “In any case, my love, please try to be nice to this young lady. We wouldn’t want her writing an article about how crabby and difficult you are, now, would we?”

Mr. Drake didn’t reply but continued staring coldly at Nancy. He seemed to be considering something. Nancy made herself keep smiling, all the while wondering if Mr. Drake planned to call the *Everglades City Beacon* to check out her story.

Which would be a problem, since there is no *Everglades City Beacon*, Nancy thought nervously.

Mr. Drake stuffed his hands into the pockets of his light gray suit. “Fine, whatever,” he muttered. “What do you want to know, Ms. Drew?”

Whew, that was close! Nancy thought.

She glanced down at her notebook. Where was I? she asked herself. Oh, yes, Jade Romero.

“As I was saying to your wife, a woman called me about a month ago, wanting to talk about Manatee Commons,” Nancy said. “Jade Romero. Do either of you know her?”

Nancy glanced up, waiting for the Drakes’ reactions. Mr. Drake shrugged. “Never heard of her,” he said after a moment. “Who is she, one of those citizens’ group nuts?” he added irritably.

“Bill, really!” Mrs. Drake exclaimed. “Those citizens’ groups people are not *nuts*, they are merely concerned about



the environment and all that sort of thing. Just like us.” She smiled at Nancy. “I don’t know this Jane Romero, either. What did she have to say about Manatee Commons, anyway? All good things, I hope.”

“I got the impression she was opposed to the project,” Nancy improvised. “But as I said before, my piece is about *your* side of the story.”

“Yes, well, I hope you don’t plan to write anything *bad* about Manatee Commons,” Mrs. Drake said.

“Of course not,” Nancy assured her.

Nancy asked the Drakes a few more questions about Manatee Commons. As she wrote down their answers, she thought about the Drakes’ reactions to her mentioning Jade’s name. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Drake had shown any sign of knowing her.

Of course, they could be good actors, Nancy thought.

After a moment Mr. Drake said, “Look, Ms. Drew. Not to cut you short, but my wife and I really do have a meeting to attend. If you have any more questions about Manatee Commons, you can speak to Eloise in our Public Relations department.”

“Must we, Bill?” Mrs. Drake said, sighing. “These meetings give me a headache. They’re so long.”

Mr. Drake ignored her. “Good day, Ms. Drew,” he said, glancing meaningfully at the door. Once again he seemed to be in a big hurry to get rid of her.

The Café Blue Marlin was on a pretty, lively street overlooking the beach. The walls, tables, and chairs were painted turquoise and yellow, and tropical birds sat in cages, singing and squawking at the customers.

Nancy walked into the main room and glanced around. Bess and George were sitting at a table near the window. Bess was staring longingly at a bunch of guys and girls who were inline skating down a boardwalk in their bathing suits. “Hey, Nancy!” she said. “Doesn’t that look like fun?” she added, nodding at the skaters.

“It looks like a blast,” Nancy agreed. She pulled up a chair and sat down. “We can do that later— after we solve our mystery.”

A waitress came by and set two tall glasses in front of Bess and George. The glasses contained what looked like purple milkshakes, and they were decorated with pineapple slices and fresh flowers.

Nancy laughed. “What’s *that*?”

“A purple passion smoothie made with grape juice, bananas, and raspberry yogurt,” George explained. She took a sip. “Mmm, it’s good, you should have one.”

Nancy ordered one from the waitress. After studying the menus, the girls also ordered conch fritters and shrimp Caesar salads for lunch.

“Be right back with that, ladies,” the waitress said, scribbling down their orders.

After she was gone, George leaned across the table and wriggled her eyebrows at Nancy. “Well? How did your

undercover mission at Panterra go? Did you wrestle all their corporate secrets out of them?"

"Well, maybe not *all* of them," Nancy joked. She told the girls about her encounter with Mrs. Drake, then Mr. Drake.

When she had finished, she said, "I asked them if they'd ever heard of Jade Romero. They both said no. I couldn't tell if they were lying or not. Mr. Drake has a pretty good poker face, and Mrs. Drake is just kind of giddy and cheerful about everything."

"Mr. Drake! Mrs. Drake!" a voice squawked.

Nancy glanced up in alarm. Was someone eavesdropping on their conversation?

Then she realized that the voice was coming from a nearby birdcage. A green-and-red parrot was staring at her with its big black eyes.

"Mr. Drake! Mrs. Drake! Squawwwwwwk!"

"Oh, that is so *cute*!" Bess cried out.

Nancy glanced around. Some of the customers were staring curiously at Nancy and her friends.

"Yeah, but we'd better keep it down, or everyone in the restaurant's going to know what we're talking about," Nancy told George and Bess in a low voice. "Anyway. That's how *it* did. How did you guys do? Did you find anything at the library?"

"Did we find anything? Of course!" Bess reached into her bag and pulled out a file folder. She slid it over to George. "You want to do the honors?"

George opened the file folder and took out some photocopies. Nancy glanced at them. They looked like newspaper articles.

“We copied these for you from some of the local papers,” George explained. “See what you think.”

Nancy leafed through the articles. George and Bess had done a good job. There were many articles. Obviously, whatever the Panterra Corporation did was big news in these parts.

As Nancy leafed through the articles, several headlines caught her eye:

Panterra Corp.’s New Housing Complex,  
Della Marina Estates, Runs  
into Controversy

Panterra Corp. Investigated for  
Possible Environmental Violations

Citizens’ Group Forms to Fight  
Manatee Commons

“What’s this about a citizens’ group?” Nancy asked curiously. She remembered the Drakes talking about citizens’ groups.

“CAMC,” George replied. “That stands for Citizens Against Manatee Commons. According to the article, they formed just recently to fight Manatee Commons. They’re

saying it's going to cause terrible environmental and ecological problems for the Everglades."

"Who's in the group?" Nancy asked. "Is it a bunch of people who work at the park, like Susan?"

"It's citizens from all over the place," Bess said, pointing to the article. "There's some leader guy— his name is in there somewhere."

Nancy scanned the article quickly. "Here he is. Jeff Kelly."

"Jeff Kelly! Jeff Kelly!" the parrot squawked. "Leader guy!"

People turned to stare at Nancy and her friends. "Shhh!" Bess chided the parrot.

The waitress came by with their lunch order. "Here you go, ladies," she said, setting down three shrimp Caesar salads and a basket of fried conch fritters. "Enjoy."

"Thank you," George said, popping a fritter into her mouth. "Mmm, these conch things are great!"

"Like onion rings, but better," Bess agreed.

Nancy sampled one, too. It was yummy. She knew that conch—which the waitress had pronounced "conk"—was a local shellfish. She'd never seen it on any of the menus in the restaurants back home.

As they ate their lunch, Nancy scanned the rest of the articles that George and Bess had copied at the library. They all seemed to point to the same few facts: the Panterra Corporation's various housing, office, and shopping complexes had all been built on the outskirts of

the Everglades. And they had all contributed, or been accused of contributing, to the park's environmental and ecological problems.

But did any of this have anything to do with Jade's disappearance? Nancy wondered.

Nancy decided to get more information about Jade from Susan and Griffin. Specifically, she needed to know whether Jade had ever been involved in citizens' groups, environmental and otherwise. She also needed to know how strongly Jade had felt about the degradation of the Everglades.

Half an hour later after enjoying a dessert of mango parfaits, the girls got up to go. As Nancy was leaving the tip, she noticed a woman sitting two tables away. She was hunched over a newspaper, wearing a big white hat.

The woman glanced over her shoulder—ever so slightly—in the direction of Nancy's table. Nancy noticed just then that the woman's newspaper was upside down.

Nancy frowned. Had the woman been listening to their conversation?

"Come on, Nancy, let's go," Bess said from the doorway.

The woman glanced away quickly. Nancy shrugged and followed Bess and George. "Okay, coming," she called out.

As they left Nancy turned and stared at the woman one last time. Now the woman was talking quietly into a purple cell phone.

There was something familiar about her. Or am I just being paranoid? Nancy wondered.

In any case she made a mental note: big white hat, purple cell phone. She would remember the woman if she ran into her again dressed like that.

“Do you suppose Jade might have been a member of CAMC?” Bess spoke up from the backseat.

The girls were driving back to Flamingo. The midafternoon sun beat down and shimmered on the asphalt pavement. Thank goodness for air conditioning, Nancy thought fleetingly as she made a left turn at a light ten miles outside of the park.

“That would explain the piece of paper you found with the word *Pantera* on it, Nan,” George agreed.

Nancy nodded. “Maybe. Or maybe Jade was interested in the Panterra Corporation’s business all on her own, without being a part of CAMC or any other group.” She added, “We can ask Susan when we get back to Flamingo. We’re meeting her later this afternoon for a sunset cruise thing.”

“A sunset cruise sounds like fun!” Bess exclaimed.

“I want to talk to Griffin, too,” Nancy added. “He might know some stuff about Jade that Susan doesn’t know.”

“Don’t be too hard on the poor guy, okay?” Bess reminded Nancy. “He’s still in mourning.”

“I’ll try to be nice,” Nancy promised.

Nancy pressed her foot on the accelerator and sped up slightly. The road was relatively deserted, with an orange grove on one side and a fallow field on the other. Tall, brownish green palm trees lined both sides of the road. Just

ahead of them, a flock of herons swooped through the air. One of them had a small fish dangling from its mouth.

Nancy glanced in the rearview mirror. There was a gray car behind them, in the distance. No other cars were around.

"It is so *hot*," Bess remarked, fanning herself with the road map. "When we get back to our cabin, I'm going to sit in the bathtub in my bathing suit and pretend it's a swimming pool."

"I'll crank up the AC," Nancy offered. She reached down and adjusted the controls. She peeked in the rearview mirror again. The gray car was catching up to them.

That driver's going awfully fast, she thought.

The mysterious gray car continued closing the distance. Out of instinct, Nancy glanced at the license plate number. The plate was caked with mud and partially obscured.

She could just barely make out the first three letters. The first one looked like *L*. No, *J*. The second one was a *D*, and the third one was an *O*.

*JDO*. But the rest of the plate was unreadable.

All of a sudden, the gray car veered into the left lane and put on an extra burst of speed. It caught up to Nancy's car, as if to pass her.

Instead of moving ahead, the gray car started inching closer to Nancy's. Nancy tried to inch to the right, to get out of the way. But the road had no shoulder. In seconds she would smash against a palm tree or roll over the grassy embankment.



The gray car inched even closer to Nancy's car. "Nancy, look out!" Bess shouted.



## ***Girl Overboard***

The gray car bumped up against the side of the girls' rental. Nancy heard the awful sound of metal scraping against metal.

"What is that crazy person doing?" George yelled.

"I think that crazy person is trying to run us off the road," Nancy said.

She gripped the wheel tightly, trying to stay in control as she felt their car weave and wobble to the right. She glanced quickly at the edge of the road. There was a steep embankment leading down to a dense grove of orange trees.

If we get run off the road, Nancy thought worriedly, we could go tumbling down the embankment. Our car could flip over. . . .

Nancy glanced to the left, trying to make out the driver's face. The windows of the gray car were tinted, making it difficult to see in. Plus, the person was wearing dark glasses, a wide-brimmed hat, and a coat with the collar turned up.

A coat in this heat? Nancy wondered. Obviously the person was trying to disguise him or herself.

A disguise meant that the person had intended to follow Nancy and her friends, and to run them off the road. The whole thing had been premeditated.

The gray car bumped Nancy's again, but harder this time. Bess let out a scream. Nancy was able to hold the car steady, but barely. Thinking quickly she abruptly slammed on the brakes.

The gray car didn't stop. Instead, it kicked up a cloud of dust and sped away, out of sight.

The girls' car did a one-eighty in the middle of the road before coming to a stop. Bess was still screaming, while George was white-knuckling the dashboard, not saying a word.

"Bess, it's okay, the other car's gone!" Nancy yelled.

Bess clamped a hand over her mouth and stopped screaming. "Oh."

Nancy shifted the car into Park, opened the door, and got out. The air shimmered with heat. Nearby, a couple of roseate spoonbills were sitting on the ground, watching her.

Nancy pushed her hair back and knelt down to examine the driver's side door. There was a slight dent and some scratches. Considering everything, though, the damage wasn't too bad. Wiping a bead of sweat from her forehead, she got back into the car.

"Well?" Bess asked. "How bad is it?"

"Not too much damage," Nancy said.

Nancy started the car up again. She proceeded down the road as fast as the speed limit would allow.

George turned to her. "Um, Nancy? What are you doing?"

"I'm going to try to catch up to that gray car," Nancy replied. "I want to get the rest of the license plate number."

"What if that crazy person wants to play bumper cars again?" Bess asked anxiously.

"I won't let that happen, believe me," Nancy promised.

The gray car had gotten too much of a head start, though, and by the time Nancy reached the next intersection, the gray car was nowhere in sight.

"I want to report a hit-and-run."

Back at their cabin at Flamingo, Nancy was on the phone with the local police. George was lying on the floor, dressed in sweats, doing some ab crunches. Bess was in the bathroom, taking a shower. Nancy could hear her singing.

After a moment Nancy was transferred to a police officer named Detective Garcia. Nancy told her what had happened to her, Bess, and George on their way home from Miami. Detective Garcia took down the information, then began asking Nancy some questions.

"You didn't get the whole license plate number?" Detective Garcia asked.

"I'm afraid not. Just 'JDO.' The rest of it was covered with mud."

“Were those the first three letters, or the last three letters?”

“First.”

“Uh-huh,” Detective Garcia said. “You say it was some sort of a gray four-door sedan? Did you catch the make?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Dark gray or light gray or silvery gray?” Nancy thought for a moment. “More like dark gray. Like a charcoal gray.”

“Uh-huh. What about a description of the driver? Male or female? White, African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic, or other?”

“I’m sorry, but I couldn’t tell,” Nancy said apologetically. “The person was wearing a coat with the collar turned up, plus a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses. I couldn’t even tell if it was a man or a woman.”

“A coat in this heat?” Detective Garcia sounded surprised.

“That’s what I thought, too,” Nancy said.

Detective Garcia asked Nancy a few more questions, then she took Nancy’s name and phone number at the cabin. She promised to try to run a license check based on Nancy’s information and call her with the results.

Nancy thanked her and hung up. “Any progress?” George asked her. “Nine, ten, eleven,” she said as she continued to do her ab crunches. “I’m almost finished with this set,” she explained.

“She said she’d do what she could, based on the partial license plate number and the description of the car,” Nancy said. She picked up the phone again.

“Now who’re you calling?” George asked.

“I’m going to try to find the leader of CAMC— Citizens Against Manatee Commons. This Jeff Kelly guy.”

Nancy cradled the phone against her ear, then picked up the phone book and put it on her lap. She looked up Jeff Kelly’s name. There were a dozen Jeff Kellys in the phone book.

“Oh, great,” Nancy moaned, then began dialing.

A man answered on the first try. “Hello?”

“Hi, Jeff Kelly? Is this the Jeff Kelly who’s the head of CAMC?”

“The head of *what*? You’ve got the wrong number.”

“Oh, sorry.”

Nancy hung up and tried again. She went through eight similar conversations before she finally got lucky.

When she dialed the number of the ninth Jeff Kelly, a man’s voice answered. But instead of the usual “Hello?” he said, “Sandy?”

Nancy started. “Uh, no, this is Nancy.”

“Sorry, I was expecting another call,” the man said. “What can I do for you?”

“Is this Jeff Kelly of CAMC?”

“Speaking.”

Nancy hesitated for a second. Should she come right out and ask him if he knew Jade Romero? Or should she get more information about CAMC and the Drakes first?

She decided on the latter course. “I’m interested in learning more about your group,” she said after a moment. “I’m also interested in learning about the Panterra Corporation’s projects in southern Florida.”

There was a silence on the other end. “What’s your interest, Nancy?” Jeff Kelly said after a moment.

“I’ve been reading some articles. It sounds like their projects have caused a lot of harm to the Everglades,” Nancy explained.

“That’s the understatement of the year.” Jeff chuckled dryly. “Listen, there’s a Save the Manatees lunch benefit at the Coconut Beach Club tomorrow, one o’clock. CAMC isn’t sponsoring it, another environmental group is. But I’ll be there, and so will some other CAMC members. The Drakes will be there, too.”

“The Drakes?” Nancy said, surprised.

“They come to all the pro-environment events,” Jeff said. “It’s good public relations,” he added sarcastically.

Jeff gave Nancy directions to the Coconut Beach Club. When he’d finished, he said, “See you tomorrow, then. It should be a fun time—it’s a good cause, and you’ll get the full Drake effect.”

“Thanks for your help, Jeff.”



“No problem.”

Nancy said goodbye, then hung up. George had moved on to pushups. “What was *that* about?” George asked her, huffing and puffing.

“We’re going to a party tomorrow. It’s a ‘save the manatees’ benefit. And I’m going to need you to do a special job,” Nancy told her.

George stopped in the middle of a pushup. “What sort of ‘special job’?”

Nancy winked at George. “You’ll see.”

Bess emerged from the bathroom dressed in a fluffy pink robe. She was towel-drying her hair with a pink towel. “Why does George get a special job? Why don’t I?” she complained.

“Because *you* don’t look like Jade Romero,” Nancy replied.

The sun was just going down as Nancy, Susan, George, and Bess climbed aboard the large white sailboat. Susan had arranged for the girls to go on a special sunset cruise aboard the *Seabreeze*.

Nancy was wearing a sundress that matched the cornflower blue of her eyes. Bess’s dress was white, and George and Susan were both wearing linen slacks and shirts. The air was cool, especially on the boat. Nancy was glad that she’d brought her jeans jacket along.

The *Seabreeze* was run by a couple of friends of Susan’s, Jody and Michael, who took tourists for cruises around Florida Bay. Now, as the four girls strapped on their life

preservers and sat down in their seats, Jody came up to them with glasses of a fruity-looking punch decorated with sprigs of fresh mint.

“Cocktails?” Jody offered. “It’s a mixture of seltzer, papaya juice, orange juice, and pineapple juice. I made it myself from an old family recipe.”

“Mmm, thanks,” Bess said, taking a glass.

“Thank you,” Nancy said, taking a glass, too. “We’re really excited about this cruise, Jody. How long will we be out?”

“About an hour. Just sit back and enjoy,” Jody said with a smile.

As Jody and Michael got the boat going, the four friends sipped their punches and stared out at the sunset. The sky was streaked with beautiful ribbons of pink, gold, and red. Hundreds of sea birds— pelicans, ospreys, herons, seagulls, and egrets— swooped through the air, then dove into the water for fish. In the distance Nancy could see tiny islands dotting the waters.

Nancy took a deep breath. The air was fresh and salty smelling.

“I can’t believe what you guys went through this afternoon,” Susan said, tossing her long red hair over her shoulders. Just before boarding the Seabreeze, Nancy had filled Susan in on their trip to and from the Panterra Corporation. “Do the police have any information about who tried to run you off the road?” Susan asked.

“Officer Garcia called me about an hour ago,” Nancy replied. “So far, she hasn’t come up with anything.”

“That’s too bad.” Susan bit her lip. “Listen, girls. I asked you to come down here to visit, and I was hoping you’d help me find out what happened to Jade. But I didn’t expect you to be in danger. I don’t like it that someone tried to send you flying into a ditch or whatever. I feel responsible.”

“No problem, Susan,” Bess piped up. “What’s a little detective work without danger? George, Nancy, and I are used to it. We thrive on danger, don’t we?”

George and Nancy stared at Bess, then at each other, and as if on cue burst out laughing.

“Um, right,” George said after a moment. “We thrive on danger.”

“We’ll be careful,” Nancy reassured Susan. “And if things get too hairy—well, we’ll rethink the whole situation.”

Susan nodded. “Good.”

Then Nancy remembered what she had meant to ask her friend. “Listen, Susan. Was Jade involved in any environmental groups that you know of? Was she really into preserving the Everglades?”

Susan looked thoughtful. “She wasn’t in any official environmental groups that I know of, although she may have gone to a meeting or two here and there,” she said after a moment. “I’m not sure. You should ask Griffin. And in answer to your second question—yes, she was concerned about preserving the Everglades. Everyone who works here is really, really concerned about that.”

Nancy fell silent. She thought about what Susan had said and made a mental note to talk to Griffin as soon as possible.

Bess got up and went over to the railing. "Wow, sunset cruises are so cool."

"Bess, be careful," Susan warned her. "Don't stand so close to the railing."

"I'm fine, I'm holding on tight," Bess said. She bent down and pointed to something in the water. "Ohmigosh, look, there's the cutest little osprey or heron or whatever swimming around down there—"

Just then a motorboat passed by, going way too fast. Nancy saw the name of the boat out of the corner of her eye. Pan-something, she noted. *Panther*, maybe?

The motorboat circled the *Seabreeze*, kicking up more water, then sped back toward the Flamingo marina. The *Seabreeze* bobbed wildly in its wake.

"Oh, no!" Bess cried out. She lost her balance, and went over the railing.



## 8

### *Mistaken Identity*

Nancy stared in horror as her friend slipped overboard.

Bess hit the dark water with a loud splash. "Help!" she screamed. "*Hellllp!*"

Nancy leaped to her feet. So did George and Susan. "Susan, tell Jody and Michael to stop the boat!" Nancy shouted.

"Okay!" Susan turned and rushed off.

Nancy glanced down at Bess, who was bobbing around in the sunset-streaked waves. Bess, who was a good swimmer, had panicked, Nancy could tell. She wasn't even trying to swim. At least she has her life preserver on, Nancy thought. In the distance Nancy could hear the motorboat gunning its engines and speeding back in the direction of Flamingo.

"Nancy, there are *sharks* in the bay!" George cried out.

"I know. She's panicked. I'm going in after her."

"What do you want me to do, Nan?" George asked calmly.

"Stay here and keep an eye out for—for sharks." Nancy shook off her leather sandals. "Hang on, Bess!" she shouted. Then she executed a perfect dive into the water.

The warm, salty water swirled around Nancy's head. She came up for air, sputtering for breath. She saw right away that Bess was just a couple of feet from her.

"Nancy! *Heiiiiiiip!*" Bess screamed, flailing her arms.

Nancy swam over to her. "Bess, just relax. I'll get you."

Bess grabbed Nancy around the neck. They both went underwater for a minute.

Bess was holding Nancy's neck way too tightly. Coming up for air, Nancy tried to shake her off. "No, not like that," she sputtered. "We'll both drown! Let me put an arm around you in a crosschest carry. Come on, you know how to do it. Relax, it'll be okay."

"Oh, yeah, like I can really relax!" Bess wailed.

Finally Bess calmed down and let Nancy help her back to the *Seabreeze*. As they swam, Nancy saw something out of the corner of her eye: a creature with its silvery black head out of the water. For a second Nancy almost panicked. Was it a shark? No. She quickly realized that it was some sort of large fish. The fish bobbed up again, and then swam off in the other direction.

Nancy and Bess finally reached the *Seabreeze*. Jody and Michael had stopped the boat and were gazing anxiously over the edge. So were Susan and George.

Nancy and Bess climbed the metal ladder that was attached to the side of the boat. When they got to the top, George offered a hand to hoist them up and over onto the deck.

"Are you okay?" Susan demanded.

"We're fine," Nancy replied breathlessly. Jody handed Nancy and Bess towels. "My gosh, what happened?"

"I was looking at this cute little bird or whatever, and I got too close to the edge," Bess said sheepishly.

"You're lucky you got out of there before the sharks got curious," George chided her.

All the blood drained out of Bess's face. "I was just starting to forget about them! George, you shouldn't have reminded me—now I'll have nightmares forever."

George glanced at Nancy and grinned apologetically. "I guess I shouldn't have mentioned the sharks."

"I guess not."

Jody and Michael went belowdecks to turn the *Seabreeze* back toward shore. Nancy's and Bess's dresses were soaked. They sat on a bench and huddled under layers of towels.

"*Now*What?" Bess said, shivering. She ran a hand through her sopping-wet hair. "My hair is a total wreck, and I spent an hour blow-drying it today!"

"I'm sorry our evening was ruined, girls," Susan apologized. "We'll go back to your cabin, get you guys changed, and then drive to my favorite little lobster hut for dinner. My treat."

"Lobster, what a great idea," Bess said.

"Sounds good to me," George agreed. She turned to Nancy. "Nan? What about you?"



“Huh? What? Oh, lobster sounds fine,” Nancy replied.

But she was lost in thought about the incident that had just taken place. Was it pure coincidence that the motorboat had been going by us so fast? she wondered. Or was it not coincidence at all?

The following afternoon Nancy, Bess, George, and Susan arrived at the Coconut Beach Club. The club was a short drive from Flamingo, right on the water. It was in a beautiful old Art Deco building from the 1920s. Nancy couldn't help noticing all the limousines and sports cars that were pulling up to the entrance.

This is going to be a fancy party, she thought and was glad she and her friends had dressed up.

Bess pulled a mirror out of her purse and examined her face as they opened the front door. “Do I look okay? Is my lipstick on straight?”

“You look great! No one will ever know that you were almost eaten by sharks less than twenty-four hours ago,” George teased her.

Bess glared at her. “George! You promised you wouldn't mention the sharks!”

“All right, you two,” Nancy scolded. She turned to Susan. “I'm so glad you could come with us.”

“Even volunteers get an afternoon off once in a while,” Susan said, grinning. “Besides, I'm kind of eager to meet the famous Bill and Esther Drake. I've read about them in the papers and seen them in the local news but never in person.”

The four friends went inside, signed in at the Welcome table, and paid the entrance fee. The lobby was swarming with people who were dressed in everything from jeans and T-shirts to fancy suits and cocktail dresses.

"Isn't this a fabulous event," Nancy heard one woman say to another. "Saving the manatees. What a fabulous cause!"

"Yes, it *is* a fabulous cause," the other woman agreed. "Manatees, are they some sort of endangered bird or something?"

"No, darling, manatees are those enormous prehistoric-looking creatures that live in the water and get in the way of motorboats," the first woman explained. "Actually, they're rather ugly."

Nancy and her friends proceeded into the main hall, which was even more crowded than the lobby. There was a huge buffet table at one end of the room, and a drinks table at the other. A string quartet was playing classical music.

Nancy glanced around. "I'm going to try to find Jeff Kelly. George, you stay close to me, in case we run into the Drakes."

George nodded. "I know my assignment."

Bess frowned at Nancy. "Explain George's assignment to me again."

"George is going to pretend to be Jade when I introduce her to the Drakes. That way, I'll be able to tell if the Drakes and Jade knew each other," Nancy explained in a low voice.

"You're the makeup queen, Bess. Didn't you notice that I had different makeup on?" George pointed to her face.

“Purple eyeshadow and bright pink lipstick. Susan told me that’s what Jade always wore, which is not exactly *my* look.”

Bess squinted at her. “Oh, yeah. Wow, I’ve never seen you in purple eyeshadow. It’s a huge improvement, actually,” she teased.

“Thanks a lot,” George grumbled.

“Just kidding! Gotta get you back for all those shark jokes,” Bess said with a grin.

The four girls worked their way through the crowd. After a while Bess excused herself to hit the buffet table. Susan found some people she knew, and stopped to talk to them.

Nancy and George continued weaving through the mob, trying to find Jeff Kelly. At one point they ran into Mrs. Fitzgerald, Susan’s dorm mother at Flamingo.

Mrs. Fitzgerald was dressed in a black cocktail dress with a Save the Manatees button pinned to it. She noticed George’s makeup and gave her a quizzical smile.

“I know, I know,” George said before Mrs. Fitzgerald had a chance to say anything. “The makeup. I *really* look like Jade now, don’t I? I’m kind of on assignment. Don’t ask.”

“Okay, I won’t,” Mrs. Fitzgerald said, shrugging. “But, yes, you do look like her.”

“So you’re interested in saving the manatees, Mrs. Fitzgerald?” Nancy asked her.

Mrs. Fitzgerald nodded. “Of course! This is a very worthy cause.”

"I couldn't agree more." Nancy glanced around. "By the way, do you happen to know Jeff Kelly?"

"Jeff Kelly?" Mrs. Fitzgerald repeated. "That name sounds so familiar."

"He's the leader of CAMC. Citizens Against Manatee Commons," Nancy explained.

Mrs. Fitzgerald nodded. "Oh, yes, *him*." She glanced around the room, then pointed. "It's that man over there, standing to the right of the door. He's wearing a maroon tie."

"Thank you."

Nancy and George headed over to the door. Jeff Kelly was a middle-aged guy with a rugged build, graying-black hair, and piercing blue eyes. He was dressed in a gray pinstripe suit. He, too, wore a Save the Manatees button.

Nancy introduced herself and George. "We talked on the phone yesterday," she reminded Jeff.

Jeff's blue eyes lit up. "Oh, yeah, right. You were interested in chatting about Manatee Commons." Jeff glanced at George. "You—you look familiar. You've been to some of the CAMC meetings, right?"

George glanced at Nancy, waiting for a cue. Obviously, she wasn't sure whether she should pretend to be Jade or not.

Nancy smiled at Jeff. "Actually, she hasn't. But we're wondering if someone who looks a lot like George has been to the CAMC meetings. Her name is Jade Romero."

“Oh, yeah, Jade Romero. Wow, you two *do* look alike,” Jeff said to George. “Yeah, this Jade girl’s been to a few of our meetings. I haven’t seen her around in a while, though.”

Nancy nodded. “Would you say that Jade is— was—a pretty major player in CAMC?”

Jeff started. “A major player? No, you could hardly call her that. She came to a few of our meetings, that’s all. She took some of our literature.”

Nancy considered this new information. One theory about Jade’s disappearance was that she’d been deeply involved in the opposition against Manatee Commons and that the Drakes had targeted her in some personal way. But according to Jeff, Jade had *not* been a big part of CAMC. Of course, that didn’t mean she hadn’t been a thorn in the Drakes’ side in some other way.

But either way, did the Drakes have a hand in Jade’s disappearance?

First, I have to figure out if the Drakes knew Jade to begin with, Nancy thought.

Just then a familiar face drifted into her line of vision. Mrs. Drake was walking through the center of the room, away from the buffet.

“Excuse me, Jeff,” Nancy said to the CAMC leader. She grabbed George’s arm. “Come on, George. I mean, Jade. You’re on!”

George looked confused. “Huh?”

“Esther Drake at three o’clock,” Nancy explained.

The two girls made their way through a crowd of people. Nancy went up to Mrs. Drake, who had stopped to admire a painting on the wall.

Mrs. Drake was dressed in a beautiful blue suit. Pinned to the right side of her collar was a panther brooch made entirely of diamonds. On the left side of her collar was a Save the Manatees button. She was nibbling from a plate of hors d'oeuvres.

"Mrs. Drake?" Nancy called out. "Hello, what a surprise!"

Mrs. Drake turned around. Her eyes fell on Nancy. "Oh, hello, dear! What are you doing here? Covering the event for your newspaper—what was it, the *Coral Gables Times*? The *Fort Lauderdale Falcon*? I am so bad with names."

Then Mrs. Drake noticed George, and gasped. Her plate of hors d'oeuvres slipped through her fingers and fell to the floor.

"What are *you* doing here?" she asked George.



## 9

### *A Warning*

The plate of hors d'oeuvres hit the floor with a loud crash. Crackers, cheese, celery sticks, and canapés scattered everywhere.

Mrs. Drake didn't even seem to notice that she'd dropped her plate. She continued to stare at George with a flustered expression.

Nancy glanced at the older woman and tried to suppress a smile. Bingo, she thought. Mrs. Drake knows Jade. Does that mean Mr. Drake knows Jade, too? Nancy couldn't imagine that Mrs. Drake knew Jade, but not Mr. Drake.

A waiter rushed up to them with a broom. "Here, let me clean that up," he offered.

Then Mrs. Drake came out of her spell. She blinked at George, a blush creeping across her cheeks. "I'm sorry, my mistake! I—I thought you were someone else," she stammered.

"Who did you think I was?" George asked innocently.

Mrs. Drake shook her head. "Oh, never mind. No one important." She smiled at Nancy. "Nancy, right? I've got your name straight, finally! How are you, dear?"

"I'm fine, thank you," Nancy said. "Mrs. Drake, this is my friend George Fayne."



“Nice to meet you, George,” Mrs. Drake said, shaking George’s hand. “Lovely party, isn’t it?”

“Yes, lovely,” George agreed.

“Is Mr. Drake here, too?” Nancy asked Mrs. Drake. She wanted to “introduce” George to Mr. Drake before Mrs. Drake could tip him off that she wasn’t Jade. Nancy was really curious to see how he would react to the Jade look-alike.

Mrs. Drake smiled. “Yes, he’s here somewhere. Wheeling and dealing, I’m sure, as always.”

George stared at Mrs. Drake’s brooch. “Wow, what a nice pin! Is that a tiger?”

“Actually, it’s a panther,” Mrs. Drake explained. “The panther is an endangered species here in Florida. And as I mentioned to your friend Nancy, we at Panterra Corporation care about endangered species.” She added, “So, George, are you a reporter, too?”

George glanced quickly at Nancy. “Actually, no. That’s Nancy’s line of work. I’m—I’m into fitness.”

“Oh, my, good for you,” Mrs. Drake said. “It can be so hard to find time for exercise! Anyway, excuse me, girls, won’t you? I have to speak with some of those interesting CAMC people.”

Nancy and George bid Mrs. Drake goodbye. After she had gone, George turned to Nancy, baffled. “She’s going to talk to the group that’s opposing Manatee Commons? I don’t understand.”

“She’s either very smart or very out of it,” Nancy said, staring after Mrs. Drake. “I can’t figure her out.” She added, “In any case, it’s obvious from the way she reacted when she first saw you that she knew Jade. That’s *very* interesting information. The thing is, she didn’t exactly act guilty. Which makes me think she didn’t have a hand in kidnapping Jade.”

“Do you still think Jade’s disappearance might be connected to the Drakes?” George asked her.

Nancy nodded. “It’s possible. But we need more facts. We also need to find Mr. Drake. I want to check out his reaction when he sees you.”

The string quartet stopped playing, and a woman in a red dress got up on the stage and tapped briskly on the microphone. “Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen. I want to introduce our main speaker for this wonderful event, which was organized by SFEC, the Southern Florida Environmental Coalition, for the purpose of saving our precious manatee population.”

The crowd broke into wild applause. “Let’s try to find Mr. Drake,” Nancy whispered to George.

Just then Nancy noticed something out of the corner of her eye. Griffin Carey—Jade’s boyfriend—was standing by the buffet table.

What’s he doing here? Nancy wondered.

Then Nancy noticed something else. Griffin was talking to an attractive blond woman. Their heads were bent very close together, as though they were discussing something very personal or confidential. The woman was dressed in a long, dark purple dress.

There was something familiar looking about the woman. Who is she? Nancy wondered. And what is Griffin doing with her?

Nancy tried to make her way over to the two of them, but before she had a chance, a wave of people cut in front of her, trying to get closer to the stage. By the time she and George got to the buffet table, Griffin and the blond mystery woman were gone.

“Oh, great,” Nancy muttered in frustration.

Just then she noticed something else. Mr. and Mrs. Drake were standing across the room, talking. At one point, Mrs. Drake turned around and pointed to Nancy and George. Mr. Drake nodded, and they continued talking.

What was that about? Nancy wondered curiously. Did Mrs. Drake just tip her husband off that George wasn't Jade Romero?

By the time Nancy and her friends got back to Flamingo, it was late in the afternoon. After making plans to meet for dinner, Susan said goodbye and went off to work.

George and Bess started walking back to their cabin. Nancy stopped in the middle of the path. “Wait up, guys,” she called out. “I want to go over to the marina to see if I can find the motorboat from last night. You guys want to come with me?”

“The motorboat from last night? Why?” George asked her.

Nancy shrugged. “Just a hunch. I want to make sure that what happened to Bess was an accident.”

“Sure, no problem, as long as I don’t fall into Florida Bay again,” Bess joked.

The three girls headed toward the marina. The air was thick with humidity. Palm trees cast long shadows across their path. As they walked, they discussed the benefit at the Coconut Beach Club.

“We know this much,” Nancy said. “Mrs. Drake definitely knew Jade. She acted surprised when she saw you, George. But she didn’t act guilty, which makes me think she wasn’t involved in any weird foul play against Jade.”

“What about *Mr. Drake*?” Bess pointed out.

“We didn’t get a chance to talk to him, so there’s no way to tell. Maybe we can figure out some other way to run into him ‘by accident.’ ”

Nancy stopped to kick a pebble that was lying in the path. “I’m kind of wondering about Griffin,” she went on. “I wish I knew what he was doing at that party, and who that blond woman was.”

“He sure got over Jade fast,” George remarked.

“You can say that again,” Nancy agreed.

After a while the girls reached the marina. There were lots of people milling around: park employees, tourists, sailors rigging up their boats. Seagulls wheeled through the air, squawking noisily. A group of children were sitting on the dock, laughing and eating ice-cream cones.

Nancy glanced around, assessing the situation. “You take that dock over there,” she told Bess, pointing to the dock

on the left. "I'll take this one. George, you take that one." She nodded to the dock on the right.

"What are we looking for, exactly?" George asked Nancy.

"A motorboat with a name that starts with the letters *PAN*," Nancy replied.

The three girls took off separately. Nancy went from boat to boat, checking out the names. There were a lot of fun names: *Queen of the High Seas*, *Gone Fishin'*, *Salty Dog*, *Sink or Swim*. But Nancy didn't come across any that started with *PAN*.

After a while Nancy and her friends headed back to their cabin. Bess and George hadn't had any luck either. "It's possible that the *Pan*-whatever motorboat doesn't have a permanent docking space here," Nancy said to Bess and George as they walked through the front door of their cabin.

Bess took her pink rhinestone sunglasses off and set them down on the front hall table. "Do you think the same guy who was driving the gray car was driving that motorboat, too?" she asked Nancy.

"It's possible," Nancy replied. "It's also possible that the two events are totally unrelated. In any case, we should—"

Then she stopped. She glanced around the living room, frowning. Something wasn't quite right, something was out of place.

She saw what it was. One of the wooden chairs had been knocked down.

Nancy whirled around. "Bess? George? Did you guys knock that chair down?" she demanded.

“No,” Bess replied. George shook her head.

Nancy glanced around the room, looking for anything else that might be out of place. All of a sudden, she had a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach. There might be an intruder in the cabin!

Nancy put a finger to her lips, indicating to the girls that they should be silent. She walked very quietly over to the bedroom, reached for the light switch and flicked it on. The room was empty.

The bathroom door was open. Nancy glanced inside quickly, then checked the shower—no one was there, either. She checked under all three beds. There was no one under any of them.

“Nancy, what is it?” Bess whispered frantically from the living room doorway.

“It’s nothing, false alarm,” Nancy started to say.

Then she stopped. There was something on the headboard of her bed—something that hadn’t been there that morning.

Nancy walked over to her bed. When she saw what it was, she gasped.

Someone had stuck a note to the headboard with a big hunting knife. The note said: “Drop this case or you’ll end up like Jade Romero.”



## *An Alligator Encounter*

Her heart hammering in her chest, Nancy stared at the warning note and the hunting knife. First the eavesdropper, then the gray car trying to run them off the road, then the motorboat incident—and now this. The case had become much more intense and dangerous than she'd ever expected.

Bess and George came rushing up to her. "Nancy, what's going on?" George demanded.

Nancy pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket, then carefully extracted the hunting knife from the headboard. She didn't want to mess up fingerprint evidence, if there was any.

She turned to Bess and George and held up the knife and the note. Bess clamped a hand over her mouth and stifled a scream.

"A-a-a knife?" she sputtered. "Someone stuck a *knife* in your bed?"

" 'Drop this case or you'll end up like Jade Romero,' " George read out loud. "Hmm, this isn't good. Someone's threatening us."

"Well, it's definitely not a *love* letter," Bess pointed out.



Nancy sat down on the edge of the bed and took a closer look at the note. The letters had been cut out of newspaper headlines and glued onto the paper to form the message.

She touched the letters carefully with her fingertip. The paper was still a little damp.

The person just put this note together today, she thought.

“Someone’s definitely trying to keep us from solving this mystery,” Nancy said. “Someone, or maybe a couple of someones working together.”

George held up her hand and began counting. “The eavesdropper, the driver of the gray car, the motorboat driver—unless that whole thing was a coincidence—and whoever left us the knife souvenir. Are they all the same person? I guess that’s the question.”

Bess marched over to the phone and picked it up. “It’s time to bring in the big guns. We have to call the police and tell them about this . . . this hunting knife incident.”

Nancy was about to tell Bess to go ahead, but then she had a thought. “Put the phone down, Bess,” Nancy told her.

Bess frowned at her. “Huh? Why?”

“I don’t want to tell the police just yet,” Nancy replied. “I have another idea.”

Bess hung up the phone and made a face. “What other idea? It had better be good because this case is getting way, way too scary.”

Nancy smiled. “We’re going camping— backcountry camping. In Whitewater Bay, via the Wilderness Waterway.”

“Cool,” George said.

“Notcool,” Bess protested. “I’m not even interested in plain-old-everyday camping. Which means that I am definitely not interested in going backcountry camping. Which means that I am definitely, *definitely* not interested in going backcountry camping in some place called the Wilderness Waterway. It sounds too wild.”

“We’re going,” Nancy said firmly. “We need to solve this case once and for all. And going to the scene of the crime is the only way.”

“Crime? What crime?” George asked her.

Nancy smiled grimly. “Whatever crime made Jade Romero disappear from the face of the earth,” she replied.

“Backcountry camping?” Susan gasped.

Susan, Nancy, Bess, and George were in the cafeteria, having dinner when Nancy told Susan her idea about going backcountry camping.

Outside the window, the sun was setting over Florida Bay. A few lone fishing boats bobbed on the horizon.

Nancy was really excited about her plan, and she hoped she could convince Susan to go along with it. She was ticking off a mental checklist of supplies they would have to gather: tents, sleeping bags, flashlights, batteries, backpacks, containers for food and water, and so forth. It had been a long time since she had gone camping, and she wasn’t familiar with the Everglades.

“Tell her she’s crazy, Susan,” Bess demanded. “We need to stay right here to solve the Jade Romero mystery, not go traipsing around in the mud or whatever.”

She speared a piece of broiled grouper, a popular local fish, and popped it into her mouth. “Besides, what are we going to eat if we’re out there in the jungle?” she went on. “Berries or twigs or something?”

Nancy glanced over her shoulder. Some volunteers at the next table were staring at their table curiously. They must have overheard Jade’s name, she thought.

She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Look. I don’t know why I didn’t think of this idea before. It makes perfect sense. We need to go backcountry camping in Whitewater Bay, where Jade disappeared.”

“But the park rangers and police have already been there,” Susan pointed out.

Nancy nodded. “True. But it can’t hurt to take another look. We might be able to find some clues the search party missed.” She added, “Worst-case scenario, we might get some new insights into the mystery.”

“That’s a good point,” Susan agreed. She slapped her knees. “All right, I’m in. I’ll see if I can get a couple of days off work.”

Nancy grinned. “Great!”

“There’ll be showers there, right?” Bess asked Susan.

Susan laughed. “Showers?”

“Okay, well, sinks, then? Mirrors?” Bess persisted.

Susan laughed again.

Bess turned to Nancy. "Do I have to go? Can't I just stay at Flamingo and hold down the fort or something?"

"Sure, you can stay here just in case our friend comes back to the cabin with another threatening note and another hunting knife," George said to her cousin.

Bess's blue eyes widened. "Hmm. Now that you mention it, maybe it's time I tried this backcountry camping thing. I mean, I've gone camping before. So what's the difference, right? So we're going to some place that's got stingrays and alligators and no showers. I'm tough, I can handle it."

Just then Griffin walked by, tray in hand. At first he didn't seem to notice the girls.

Nancy really wanted to talk to him, to ask him some questions about Jade and about the Manatee benefit. She waved to him, trying to flag him down. "Griffin! Hey, Griffin!" she called out.

Griffin stopped. Nancy wasn't sure, but he looked sort of annoyed. "Oh, hi," he muttered.

"You want to join us?" Nancy said.

"I'm just on my way out, actually," Griffin replied. "Thanks, anyway."

"Before you go, I wanted to ask you some stuff about Jade," Nancy said.

Griffin hesitated. "I really am in kind of a hurry—"

Nancy smiled. Why was he acting so unfriendly? “This’ll just take a minute. Okay?” she persisted.

Griffin put down his tray on the girls’ table, pulled over a chair, and sat down. “Okay. I really don’t like talking about her, you know? It brings back a lot of memories.” He sounded sad all of a sudden.

“You poor thing,” Bess sympathized, putting her hand on his arm.

“Thanks for understanding,” Griffin said. Then he turned to Nancy. “Okay, what did you want to ask me? I’ll do the best I can.”

“Was she—Jade—involved in any environmental groups that you know of?” Nancy asked him.

Griffin shrugged. “No, not that I know of. I mean, definitely not. She would have told me if she had been.”

“Do you know if she knew Bill and Esther Drake?” Nancy said.

“You mean those developers? I’m not sure.” Griffin added, “Hey, speaking of the Drakes. I saw you guys at the Manatee benefit yesterday. Did you have fun?”

“It was a blast,” Bess said. “*Really* good shrimp cocktail!”

“We saw you there, too,” Nancy said to Griffin. “Who was your friend?” she added.

Griffin looked confused. “Friend? What friend?”

“The blond woman,” Nancy said. “You know, long purple dress?”

Griffin shrugged and shook his head. "I'm not sure who you're talking about. I was there alone. Maybe it was just some stranger I was talking to. I don't know." He scooted his chair back and stood up. "Listen, I really do have to run. So if you don't have any more questions . . ."

"If I think of anything else, I know where to find you," Nancy said with a smile.

Griffin smiled back. Then he waved goodbye and headed for the exit.

After he left, Nancy turned to her friends. "I don't think Griffin was completely honest with us," she said. "That blond woman wasn't just some stranger he ran into. I wonder what he's hiding?"

Susan frowned. "Blond woman—blond woman— you know, I saw Griffin with her, too. You said she was wearing a long purple dress, right?"

Nancy nodded. "Right."

"And she had a purple cell phone," Susan went on, taking a sip of her iced tea. "I remember her phone because it was so cool-looking."

Nancy started. "Purple cell phone? Are you sure?"

"Yes, definitely," Susan replied. "Why?"

Nancy remembered the woman at the Café Blue Marlin with the purple cell phone and the widebrimmed hat. At the time, she'd thought that the woman seemed more than a little curious about Nancy and her friends.

Could that woman be the same one Griffin was talking to at the Manatee benefit? Nancy wondered.

Nancy and her friends got up very early the next morning to pack their gear: tents, cookware, dried food, solar showers, and other necessities. Water was the most important item, since there was no fresh drinking water where they were going. Then, right after breakfast, they launched their boats into one of the small rivers in Flamingo and began their long journey on the Wilderness Waterway, to Whitewater Bay.

Nancy and Bess were in a canoe together. George and Susan were in separate one-person kayaks. Their supplies were piled in the middle of the canoe, in waterproof sacks.

Nancy was glad Susan had been able to arrange a few days off from work. Without her, Nancy, George, and Bess would have a hard time navigating the Wilderness Waterway, which interconnected lots of little canoe trails into one big one.

As Nancy paddled, she glanced around at the amazing scenery. Mangroves, mahoganies, strangler figs, and palm trees lined the muddy banks. There were bushes of flowers like orchids and bromeliads shooting out from the gnarly brown tree branches. Nancy recognized them from her guidebooks, and from a nature walk Susan had taken them on.

"This paddling is hard work," Bess complained, pushing her canoe paddle through the water.

"Good for your deltoid muscles," George called out from her kayak.

“My del-what?” Bess said with a frown.

“Canoeing is definitely a workout,” Susan agreed.

The four girls continued paddling in silence. Egrets and other wading birds swooped through the air, hunting for food. Occasionally, the girls would spot an alligator sitting very still on a hot rock, sunning itself.

“It feels like we’ve gone back a thousand years,” George said after a while. “Like we’re a million miles from civilization.”

“Personally, *I like* civilization,” Bess replied. “Still, I guess this is kind of pretty. Except for the alligators, anyway.” She shuddered.

“Don’t forget, Bess, you’re sitting up front. It’s your job to keep an eye out for rocks and logs that we might run into,” Nancy reminded her.

“I’ve never made it as far as Whitewater Bay,” Susan said. “It’s supposed to be tricky canoeing and kayaking, so we have to be careful.”

“No problem,” Nancy started to say. But all of a sudden she felt the canoe hit something—hard. She gripped the gunwales to steady herself.

“What was that?” Bess cried out. She rose to her feet at the front of the canoe, forgetting one of the basic rules of canoeing: Never stand up.

“Bess, sit down!” Nancy shouted. “Now!”

It was too late. The canoe began wobbling from side to side, thrown off by Bess’s weight and buffeted by the



churning water. The next thing Nancy knew, the canoe had tipped over. She and Bess and all their supplies were dumped into the river.

Nancy heard Bess hit the warm, muddy water with a loud splash before she herself hit the water and was sucked under.

“Help!” Bess screamed, coming up for air.

Nancy rose to the surface and gasped for breath. Bess had found a log and was clinging to it. Seeing that her friend was okay, Nancy swam over to the upturned canoe and tried to right it. Nearby, she saw their supplies bobbing around in their waterproof sacks.

“W-what h-happened?” Bess shouted, brushing her wet hair out of her eyes.

“I think you guys hit that log,” Susan called out.

“I think you stood up when you weren’t supposed to,” George added. “Hang on!” She began kayaking in their direction.

Treading water to stay afloat, Nancy continued to try to right the overturned canoe. After a minute, she got a good grip on it. She was just about to flip it when she saw a movement out of the corner of her eye.

Nancy gasped. A large alligator had slithered off a rock on the far side of the river. It was swimming right toward Nancy and Bess!



***Ghost in the Night***

The alligator continued to swim toward Nancy and Bess. Nancy could see its long, pointy snout and tail above the surface of the muddy river. The creature didn't look friendly.

We've got to get out of the water—fast! she thought frantically.

Nancy glanced around. She needed to find something, anything, for her and Bess to swim to, to get away from the alligator. At the moment Bess was in more immediate danger than she was, since Bess was closer to the alligator.

George and Susan were having a hard time reaching Nancy and Bess because of all the supplies that were bobbing around in the water. Neither one of them seemed to have noticed the alligator.

Just then Nancy spotted a big, gnarly tree with low-lying branches. The tree was fairly close to Bess. If Bess swam fast, she might be able to get to the tree before the alligator got to her.

"Bess, see that tree over there?" Nancy called out, pointing to the tree. "I want you to swim over to it—*now!* Then climb the tree, as high up as you can go."

Bess sputtered and frowned at her. "Huh? What are you talking about, Nan? I'm doing just fine hanging onto this log."

"Bess, do as I say!" Nancy ordered her. She didn't want to mention the alligator, in case it might send Bess into a total panic.

"Okay, boss, whatever," Bess grumbled. She began swimming toward the tree.

Nancy let go of the still upside-down canoe and began swimming after Bess. The warm water swirled all around her. The alligator had sunk below the surface. Nancy could just make out its two beady eyes above the waterline. It was definitely heading in their direction!

Bess reached the tree and began climbing. Nancy did the same. "This is no good," Bess complained. "Our canoe is still upside down, and our stuff is going to get washed down the river—or is it *up* the river? I never know."

"Nancy, Bess, what are you guys doing?" George called out. She and Susan were pulling up to the base of the tree in their kayaks.

Nancy nodded in the direction of the alligator, which was just ten feet from the tree now. George followed Nancy's gaze—and gasped. "Ohmigosh, an alligator!" she exclaimed.

"A—what?" Bess's head darted around. "An alligator? Nancy, why didn't you *tell* me? Oh, no, can alligators climb trees?"

"Don't worry, Bess, you're perfectly safe up there," Susan assured her. "George, you and I might want to paddle

downstream a bit, though. You know, to get away from the big guy.”

Bess didn't look convinced about Susan's assurances of safety. “Great, we'll just hang out up here in this tree until the alligator decides to have something else for lunch!” she moaned.

Fortunately, the alligator lost interest in the girls after a while. Nancy and her friends spent the next hour rescuing their floating supplies and canoe and resuming their journey to Whitewater Bay. There were no more incidents with alligators or any other kind of wildlife.

It took the rest of the morning and afternoon to reach Whitewater Bay. The Wilderness Waterway was tricky canoeing, with winding turns. Tree roots jutting into the water made the canoe trail even narrower.

When the girls finally reached the bay, they passed a number of small islands and other potential camping spots along Cape Sable and elsewhere. Mangrove trees were everywhere, making the bay look like a wet primeval forest.

Eventually the girls settled on an island that was a little out of the way. After pulling their boats ashore, they found a small clearing in the middle of some mangroves and immediately began pitching their tents.

While they worked, Nancy pointed to some blackened branches that were lying on the ground. “Susan, that's an old campfire, right?” she asked her friend.

Susan hammered some metal spikes into the ground. “Right. Bess, pass me that rope, will you?”

Bess handed her the rope. "So there was a campfire here. So what?"

"I know it's a crazy long shot," Nancy admitted. "But you don't think this could be Jade's campsite, do you?" She poked at the blackened branches with a stick, then touched them with her fingers. "They're still warm. Not hot, but definitely warm."

Susan shrugged. "This fire could have been anybody's, although I checked with the rangers' office, and no one's applied for a backcountry camping permit around these parts in the last couple of days."

"What does that mean?" George asked her

"It means that whoever was here—whoever built this campfire—was probably here illegally," Susan explained.

Nancy pulled a red tent out of its bag and shook it out. Just then she heard the roar of a motorboat in the distance. "I wonder where that's coming from?" she said. "We didn't pass any motorboats in the bay."

"Probably the Gulf," Susan said. "The Gulf of Mexico," she added, smiling at Bess. "We're near the Gulf here. Shark Point is way up there," she said, pointing.

"Shark Point?" Bess gasped. "Alligators, sharks, how much more of this do I have to take?"

"Shark Point is a camping spot," Susan said, laughing. "Don't worry, Bess, you're safe here. We'll make sure you don't have any close encounters with sharks."

"Yes, please!" Bess said.

When the girls had finished pitching their tents, Nancy walked to the edge of the clearing and glanced around. It was a beautiful spot. Off in the distance, through the trees, she could see a thin blue ribbon of water.

It's so peaceful here, she thought.

Yet she was filled with anxiety and apprehension, too. Jade had come to this area—possibly to this very island—to go backcountry camping.

But then she had disappeared, seemingly into thin air. What had happened to her?

George and Susan went off to collect sticks for a campfire. When they got back, the four girls made dinner—Spanish rice and chicken—and then settled around the campfire to eat.

“Why does food always taste better when you eat it outside?” Bess said enthusiastically as she popped an oatmeal raisin cookie into her mouth.

“I don't know, it just does,” Nancy agreed.

The sky was growing dark with twilight. The temperature had dropped. George put her hands over the flames of the fire and rubbed them together.

“So what's our plan for tomorrow?” George asked Nancy.

“I thought we'd spend the day searching this island—and maybe some of the other islands nearby. We can split up into teams. We'll search everything with a fine-tooth comb,” Nancy answered.

“For what?” Bess asked her.

“For evidence that Jade Romero was here,” Nancy replied. “And for evidence of what might have happened to her.”

After the dishes had been washed and put away, the girls brushed their teeth and went to bed. That was one of the things Nancy had always liked about camping. Because lamps and flashlights and other light sources were in limited supply, there was nothing to do after dark except go to sleep.

Early to bed, early to rise, she thought, nestling into her sleeping bag.

Bess, Susan, and George fell asleep almost immediately. Nancy yawned, closed her eyes, and tried to fall asleep, too. She was tired and sore from the day’s hard canoeing.

It wasn’t easy, though. Weird noises were coming from outside—insect and bird and animal noises she couldn’t identify. Tiny footsteps rustled through the underbrush. Twigs snapped.

At one point something came snuffling up to the walls of the girls’ tent, making strange grunting sounds. Nancy held her breath, staying alert in case she had to rouse the others, but the grunting sounds eventually stopped, and the creature shuffled away.

How can these guys sleep through all of this? Nancy wondered, staring at her friends in their sleeping bags.

Nancy changed positions, hoping that would make falling asleep easier. She was just about to drop off when she heard another noise.



It sounded like footsteps crunching through the dry underbrush. Then a strange, eerie voice rang out.

“Gooooooo away! Gooooooo away and never come back!”

Nancy’s eyes flew open, her heart pounding. The hair on her arms stood up.

It sounds like a woman’s voice, she thought.

“Gooooooo away!” said the haunting voice.

The other girls continued to sleep. Nancy reached over to George, whose sleeping bag was right next to hers, and tried to shake her awake. George just groaned and rolled over.

“Come on, George, wake up,” Nancy whispered, but George lay very still and didn’t respond.

“Susan? Bess?” Nancy whispered, but they didn’t wake up, either.

Nancy sat up, willing the crazy pounding of her heart to slow. She reached out in the darkness and fumbled for the opening to the tent. She finally found the mesh-covered window and peered out.

The moon was bright, casting a silvery glow on the eerie nocturnal landscape. Nancy peered around, checking for the source of the spooky sound.

“Gooooooo away!” the voice rang out again.

Where is that sound coming from? Nancy wondered.

Then Nancy saw her. Under a tall palm tree was the silvery white ghost of a woman.

Nancy gasped. The woman looked just like George!



## ***Another Mysterious Disappearance***

Nancy couldn't believe it. There was a ghost outside their tent, one who looked like George!

There are no such things as ghosts, Nancy reminded herself.

She felt around in the dark for her hiking boots. As she put them on, she muttered to herself as her fingers got tangled in the laces. Then she fumbled around again, this time for the flashlight.

"Nancy?" It was Susan's sleepy voice. "What's going on?"

Finally someone had woken up. "There's someone outside," Nancy whispered.

"What?" Susan sat up, sounding much more awake.

Bess and George woke up, too. "What's up, Nancy?" George murmured.

"Is it morning?" Bess mumbled. "Because I'm way too tired. And it's way too dark."

"There's someone outside," Nancy repeated.

"What?" Bess cried out.

"I'm going to check it out," Nancy said.

Nancy scrambled to her feet, flashlight in hand. By the time she got out of the tent, the ghostly woman was gone.

Mosquitoes and no-see-ums buzzed around Nancy's head. She swatted them away impatiently, clicked the flashlight on, and swung it around in an arc.

There was no sign of the woman.

Nancy went over to the palm tree where the woman had been. She pointed the flashlight down on the ground.

"Aha," she said to herself. "Footprints. That was no ghost." Still, it was hard to make out the prints clearly, because so much underbrush was covering the dirt. There were no other clues.

Susan, George, and Bess came rushing up to her. "Nan, what's all this about a ghost?" George said breathlessly.

"It was a real person, not a ghost," Nancy replied. "She just looked like a ghost in the moonlight. In any case, she's gone." She told her friends all about the woman and her warning message to "go away and never come back."

"I-I'm going back into the tent," Bess said, shuddering.

"Not yet. I need your help. Bess, you and George grab a flashlight and go that way." Nancy pointed to the left. "Susan, you come with me. We're going to find this woman. Let's meet back at the tent in ten minutes."

Nancy and Susan had no luck finding the woman. Nancy was almost relieved when the ten minutes were up,

because it was weird and scary tramping through the dark with just a flashlight.

Bess and George were there when Nancy and Susan returned. "No ghost," George said.

"We didn't find her, either," Nancy said.

Bess crossed her arms over her chest and peered out at the darkness. "Are you *sure* she wasn't a ghost, Nancy? Absolutely one hundred percent sure?"

"There's no such thing as ghosts, Bess, and besides, we saw footprints," Nancy replied. "The real question is: Was it Jade?"

"I don't believe it," Susan said, shaking her head. Then she stared at Nancy curiously. "What did she look like?"

Nancy pointed to George. "She looked just like George."

Susan gasped. "It had to be Jade then."

"Maybe. On the other hand, if it *was* Jade, why would she be telling us to go away?" Nancy asked.

Susan sighed. "I have no idea. It doesn't make any sense."

"It definitely doesn't," Nancy agreed.

The next morning the girls woke up bright and early. Over a breakfast of pecan pancakes and coffee with evaporated milk they discussed the ghostly incident from the night before.

“Isn’t it possible,” Bess mumbled, her mouth full of pancakes, “that those footprints belonged to one of us?”

Nancy started. “I hadn’t thought of that. Yeah, I guess it’s possible.”

“Which means that *could* have been a real ghost,” Susan pointed out.

“No way,” Nancy replied. “I refuse to believe that.”

Susan didn’t look convinced. “I don’t know, Nancy,” she said in a low, frightened voice. “What if Jade really is dead? What if something really *did* happen to her while she was camping? What if that—that thing last night was really her ghost, and she’s warning us to stay away from this island?” She looked really upset as if she were about to cry.

Nancy took a sip of her coffee. “There’s got to be another explanation, Susan,” she said gently.

“I don’t know, I think Susan is right,” Bess said, shuddering. “I think we should exit this place ASAP and just leave the whole thing to the police. It’s getting way, way too dangerous.”

“As much as I hate to say it, I’m starting to agree with Bess,” George confessed.

“That’s a first!” Bess exclaimed.

Nancy convinced Bess and the others to stay for at least one more day. After breakfast they broke up into two teams—Nancy with Susan, Bess with George—and began searching the island in earnest. Nancy instructed her friends to look for anything and everything that might be related to Jade’s disappearance, or to the “ghost.”

"I really, really don't want to run into that ghost," Bess said.

"I don't think you will. But keep your eyes open for any clues to this so-called ghost, okay?" Nancy told her friend.

Bess and George headed north. Nancy and Susan walked down a wild, brambly path through the woods, toward the southern part of the island. They were both dressed in khaki shorts and T-shirts. Even though it was still early, it was already blazing hot and humid.

Nancy was wiping the sweat off her forehead when she heard the roar of an engine.

"Another motorboat," Nancy remarked.

Susan craned her head to listen. The motorboat was really gunning its engine. "It's going much too fast," she said worriedly. "That's how manatees get killed."

Nancy frowned. "Really?"

Susan nodded. "Manatees are huge creatures. They average about ten feet long. They can't swim very fast, so they're killed by speeding motorboats all the time."

"That's awful," Nancy said.

The two girls continued down the path. All at once something caught Nancy's eye. Off to the right, several objects lay glinting in the sunlight.

Nancy knelt down to pick up one of the objects. It was small and thin and sharp and caked with mud. The mud was fresh, not dried.



“It’s a metal pick,” she said after a moment. “And here’s a shovel.” She picked up a small shovel that was half-buried in twigs and leaves.

Susan knelt beside her. “Could be camping equipment,” she remarked. “Maybe some campers left them behind.” She added, “Or maybe these are the remnants of an archaeological dig.”

“Archaeological dig?” Nancy glanced at Susan. “Here, on this island?”

“We often conduct digs around the park, mostly to look for Native American artifacts,” Susan replied. “I’m not aware of any recent digs around here, though.”

Nancy remembered the article she’d found about Native American artifacts among Jade’s belongings. She’d tucked it away in her backpack somewhere. Maybe I brought it with me, she thought. She wouldn’t mind learning more about the subject.

“Nancy! Susan! Emergency!” Nancy glanced up. Bess was running down the path, waving her arms.

Nancy and Susan rose to their feet. “Bess? What’s going on?” Susan demanded.

Bess stopped in front of them. Her arms were all scratched up, her blue eyes filled with tears.

“It’s George!” she cried out. “She’s disappeared!”



## ***The Search for the Panther***

“George has disappeared!” Bess repeated frantically.

Susan put a hand on Bess’s arm. “Slow down. Tell us what happened.”

Bess panted, trying to catch her breath. Her long, blond hair was tangled with leaves and burrs.

“George and I—we got separated in the woods,” she said after a moment. “We were going down this path together. All of a sudden George says, ‘Hang on, I think I see something. Be back in a sec.’ Or something like that.”

She added, “Anyway, she went off into the woods. But she didn’t come back ‘in a sec.’ She didn’t come back at all. The next thing I knew, I heard this little scream. I called her name, but she didn’t answer. I went into the woods to look for her. And this—this is all I found.”

She held up George’s mud-covered baseball cap. She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. “I’m telling you, she’s gone!” Bess wailed. “Jade’s ghost must have kidnapped her!”

Nancy’s mind was racing. What was going on? She wondered. First the mysterious ghostly woman last night—and now this. Who else was on the island with Nancy, Bess, George, and Susan?

“Jade’s ghost did~~not~~ kidnap George,” Nancy reassured Bess. “There is no ‘Jade’s ghost.’ ” She added, “We’ll find George, don’t worry. Come on, Bess. Show us where the two of you got separated.”

Bess led Nancy and Susan to a spot in the northern part of the island. Once there, the three girls proceeded to search the entire area from top to bottom. They called George’s name over and over again, but there was no sign of George anywhere.

Nancy sat down on a rock, exhausted. Susan and Bess did the same. Nearby, a great blue heron rose into the air, fanning its enormous wings.

Nancy took a long swig of water from a thermos and passed it around. “Okay,” she said after a moment. “I think it’s time to get some help. Something has obviously happened to George, and we need to get a search party going.”

“This is *awful*,” Bess moaned. “What am I going to tell my aunt and uncle?”

“You’re not going to tell them anything yet, because we’re going to find her,” Nancy said firmly. “We need to get help. One of us is going to have to go back in one of the kayaks.”

“I’ll go,” Susan offered immediately. “I know my way back.”

Nancy nodded. “Good. Bess and I can stay here and keep searching for George.”

The girls returned to their campsite with heavy hearts. Susan packed up her gear and got into her kayak. “I’ll be

back soon, with reinforcements,” she promised. “Don’t worry, we’ll find her!”

“Be careful of alligators,” Bess said.

“I’ll be careful,” Susan replied.

Nancy watched Susan paddle away. For the first time since they’d arrived at the Everglades, she felt as though they were in over their heads.

It was early evening. A single star was twinkling in the pale gray sky. Nancy and Bess were sitting around the campfire, eating their dinner. Or at least, they were trying to. They were both too anxious about George to have any appetites.

“I’m worried sick,” Bess said. She hadn’t touched her plate of pasta.

“So am I,” Nancy said. She forced herself to smile, for Bess’s sake. “I haven’t given up hope, though.”

But Nancy wasn’t really so sure. What could have happened to George? Was her disappearance connected to Jade’s disappearance? Was Griffin involved somehow?

Or was it the Drakes who were responsible? And if so, was this all part of a grand scheme to protect the interests of the Panterra Corporation?

And who was the blond woman with the purple cell phone?

She voiced her questions out loud to Bess. “I’m just not sure what to think anymore,” she said when she had finished. “I wish I had some answers.”

“Panterra, Panterra,” Bess murmured. She glanced up from the fire, her blue eyes sparkling. “Hey, I just thought of something. Maybe it’s nothing, but . . .”

“What?” Nancy said curiously.

“I took Spanish in high school, remember? The word *pantera*. I think it means ‘panther.’ ”

Nancy stared at her friend. “Really?”

“Really,” Bess replied, nodding. “*Pantera*, ‘panther.’ The Panther Corporation.”

“Is that *pantera* with two *r*’s or one?”

“One.”

Nancy frowned. “The word *pantera* on that slip of paper I found in Jade’s stuff had one *r*. *Panterra Corporation* has two *r*’s.”

“Oh. Hmm. Maybe somebody doesn’t know how to spell,” Bess speculated.

Nancy and Bess brainstormed about the word *panther* for a while. “I remember Susan telling me that the Florida panther is an endangered species,” Nancy said. “Mrs. Drake mentioned that, too. There are only a few of them left in the Everglades.”

“There really *are* panthers here in the Everglades?” Bess’s eyes grew enormous. “Like, maybe right here on this island?”

“I don’t know about that,” Nancy said. “Anyway, do you suppose there’s some sort of connection between the Florida panther and the fact that the Panterra

Corporation's been accused of causing environmental problems to the park?"

"Maybe. Sounds possible," Bess agreed. She set her plate of pasta down. "Me, not eating! This is a first."

Nancy reached for her backpack, which was lying against a nearby tree. She pointed her flashlight at it and started rooting through it.

"What are you looking for?" Bess asked her.

"One of the articles I found in Jade's files. I saved it because it sounded kind of interesting."

Nancy finally put her finger on it. Holding it up to the flashlight, she scanned it quickly.

"It says here that a wooden statuette of a panther was discovered in southwest Florida in the nineteenth century," Nancy explained to Bess. "It was made by the Calusa Indians, who inhabited the area perhaps as early as the fifteenth century B.C. There was a rumor that the statue's twin was buried somewhere in the Everglades. No one's ever been able to find it, though."

"A statuette of a panther?" Bess repeated, looking confused. "Made of wood? How could it survive in the ground for all those years? Wouldn't it get all rotten and icky or something?"

"It says here that the muddy ground preserved the wood and kept it intact," Nancy said.

Nancy was about to continue reading the article, but all of a sudden, she heard a noise in the woods. Something rustled in the bushes.

Nancy glanced up and shined the flashlight around. A figure was walking through the woods toward them.

Bess leaped to her feet. "Nancy, it's—it's George!" she cried out joyfully.

The figure was dressed in khaki pants and a white shirt. It was a woman with short, dark hair.

The woman smiled and pulled out a gun. "Guess again," she said in a voice that was nothing like George's.

"That's not George," Nancy said to Bess. "That's Jade Romero!"

"Oh, you know my name," Jade said to Nancy. "Very clever."

"Yes, she *is* very clever, isn't she?" came a voice from behind Jade.

The person stepped forward, out of the shadows. It was a woman—an older woman—dressed in slacks and a denim shirt.

Nancy couldn't believe her eyes. "Mrs. Drake?"





## ***The Truth Is Revealed***

Mrs. Drake smiled coldly. "Hi, Nancy dear. Nice to see you again." She glanced at Bess. "I don't believe I've met your friend. Another reporter, is she?"

Nancy's mind was racing. What was Mrs. Drake doing *with* Jade? All along, she had thought the Drakes might have had something to do with Jade's disappearance.

Now Jade was holding a gun on Nancy and Bess, and Mrs. Drake was going along with it.

"You two, sit closer together," Jade ordered Nancy and Bess. "I want to be able to keep an eye on both of you."

"W-what are you doing with h-her?" Bess asked Jade, moving closer to Nancy. "We've been looking for you. Susan was super-worried about you!"

Mrs. Drake smiled. "I hired Jade and Griffin to do a job for me," she explained.

"Jade and Griffin," Nancy repeated. Things were becoming a little clearer now.

"I met Jade at a CAMC meeting," Mrs. Drake went on. "I was there in disguise. I wanted to see what the 'opposition' was planning for Bill and me. Anyway, I managed to recruit Jade for a little project. I convinced her that it would be far

more fulfilling than fighting Manatee Commons. And certainly more lucrative.”

*“Pantera,”* Nancy said suddenly. “With one*r*.”

Jade started. She held the gun a little higher in the air. “What are you talking about?” she snapped.

It’s all coming together now, Nancy thought. The slip of paper I came across in Jade’s files, with the word*pantera* written on it. The panther-shaped brooch Mrs. Drake was wearing at the manatee benefit. The small pick and shovel Susan and I found on the island yesterday. The article about the Calusa Indians . . .

“You’re after the twin of the Calusa panther statuette, aren’t you?” Nancy said to Mrs. Drake. “You hired Jade and Griffin to find it for you.”

Mrs. Drake started. “How did you know?”

“Lucky guess,” Nancy replied.

Mrs. Drake’s eyes gleamed. “I’ve dreamed all my life of finding that panther,” she said in a faraway voice. “My father used to talk about it when I was a little girl. He was an archaeologist, you see.”

“Did your husband know about the panther?” Nancy asked her.

“Bill knew nothing about it,” Mrs. Drake said, shrugging. “With him it’s buildings, buildings, buildings. Anyway, recently, I came into possession of some very old maps that pointed to this area— this island—as the place where the panther might be buried. But neither I nor anyone else could search for it openly, since any archaeological remains

found in the park are automatically the property of the federal government."

Nancy was amazed at how articulate and incontrol Mrs. Drake seemed. Before, she had acted so goofy and scatterbrained. Clearly, that was not the real Mrs. Drake. *This was.*

"That's where I came in," Jade said with a grin. "Mrs. Drake was generous. She paid Griffin and me a lot of money, and we came up with a plan for me to 'disappear' so I could dig for the panther in secret. Griffin covered up for me back in Flamingo and made sure no one would come looking for me while I searched for the panther."

Then something else occurred to Nancy. "Is Griffin the one who ran us off the road while we were driving home from Miami? And sped by us in the motorboat? And left us the threatening note with the hunting knife?"

Jade nodded. "Yup. He made sure he was going to keep you far, far away from me."

"What about the blond woman at the Save the Manatees benefit?" Bess piped up. "Was she his new girlfriend, or what?"

Jade bristled.

"That was my secretary, Sandy," Mrs. Drake explained. "She was giving him some instructions for me. She also followed you girls to the Café Blue Marlin that day you came by my office, Nancy."

That's why she looked so familiar, Nancy thought. "Where's Griffin now?" she asked.

“Right here.”

Nancy glanced up. Griffin emerged from a thick patch of mangroves. He had George with him. George had a gag over her mouth, and her wrists were bound with rope.

Bess leaped to her feet. “George! Are you okay? You let go of her, you bully,” she shouted at Griffin.

Jade pointed the gun at Bess. “Sit down! Everything was going fine till you all showed up. I guess my pretending to be a ghost last night didn’t scare you away.”

“Mrs. Drake and I came to the island earlier today, to check on Jade’s progress,” Griffin spoke up. “Your friend here, George, stumbled into us. She overheard us talking about the panther. That’s why we had to keep her quiet.”

“Obviously she knows too much,” Mrs. Drake said, nodding at the bound-and-gagged George. “And now, so do the two of you,” she added ominously to Nancy and Bess.

“We’re, um, very good at keeping secrets,” Bess said meekly.

“Get up,” Mrs. Drake ordered.

Nancy and Bess got to their feet. While Jade kept the gun pointed at them, Griffin tied them up with rope and gagged them, too. Then he shoved the two girls, along with George, onto the ground.

“Good luck,” Mrs. Drake said. “Maybe if you’re lucky, *areal* panther will find you and put you out of your misery!”

With that, she, Jade, and Griffin turned and disappeared into the woods.

Nancy lay on the muddy ground, her heart racing. Mosquitoes swarmed all around her head. In the distance, she could hear the sounds of Mrs. Drake, Jade, and Griffin talking and laughing.

She tried to make eye contact with George and Bess. As far as she could tell, George was unharmed—just scared as she and Bess were.

If only I could get free of this rope, Nancy thought in frustration.

Nancy could tell that George, who was struggling to loosen her knot, had the same idea. Neither of them was having any success.

Nancy glanced around. Even in the failing light, she could see that there were some sharp-looking rocks nearby.

As she scooted over to one, a lizard crawled out from under it and darted away. Nancy grimaced.

Then she positioned her wrists over the rock and began sawing slowly, carefully.

She felt a stinging pain in her right hand, and blood oozed out. She'd cut herself and knew she'd have to be more careful.

Nancy continued sawing, methodically. She could feel that one of the ropes was starting to fray.

Good, she thought. Just a little more, and I'll be free.

Nancy continued sawing away at the bond. Come on, come on, come on, she thought. She lost track of time because she was so intent on freeing herself and her friends and going after Jade and the others.

Finally she felt the rope snap. She wriggled her wrists out of the now-useless knot. Then she took off her gag and began working to free George and Bess.

“Oh, thank goodness,” George said when Nancy had taken off her gag. She gulped down a deep breath, then another. “I thought we were going to die!”

“Are you okay?” Bess asked George. “We were so worried about you! We thought you’d been eaten by sharks or something!” Bess grabbed her cousin and hugged her tightly.

George hugged her back. “I’m fine. Just a little freaked out. But they didn’t hurt me or anything. And I definitely didn’t run into any sharks.”

“Come on, we don’t have a second to waste,” Nancy cried out. “We have to stop them before it’s too late.”

“Nancy, they have a *gun*,” Bess pointed out. “Shouldn’t we just wait until Susan comes back with help and let them deal with it?”

“We *have* to go after them,” Nancy said. “Otherwise they could disappear for good! We have no idea what they’ve planned. Come on!”

Grabbing her flashlight, Nancy took off through the dense woods. In the distance she could see the dark waters of the Gulf of Mexico. She could hear a motorboat starting up its engine.

Pumping her arms, Nancy ran as fast as she could. Bess and George followed close behind.

I hope we're not too late, Nancy thought. I hope they don't get away!

A few minutes later Nancy reached the thin patch of beach. Jade, Griffin, and Mrs. Drake were just getting into a motorboat. On the side of the motorboat was a single word: *Panther*. It was the same motorboat that had caused Bess to fall overboard during their sunset cruise, Nancy realized.

Nancy could see that Jade was holding a small wooden panther in one hand. She had found the Calusa statuette!

Nancy knew that the panther was officially the property of the federal government. But Mrs. Drake and her partners-in-crime were going to keep it for themselves and make their escape.

"You guys stay here," Nancy whispered to her friends.

"Nan, what are you doing?" Bess whispered back.

"Just stay here," Nancy ordered. "Stay behind these trees, out of sight."

Without wasting another second, Nancy lay on the sand on her belly. Moving quietly, she dragged herself along the ground, next to a path of low-lying shrubs.

She made her way slowly to the motorboat, where Jade, Griffin, and Mrs. Drake were discussing something. Nancy couldn't hear what they were talking about over the sound of the idling motor.



Almost there, Nancy thought. It was dark out now, so she had an advantage. Jade and the others didn't seem to be paying attention to anything around them.

She knew Jade was the one with the gun, so she would have to be very careful of her. Nancy was very close to the boat now.

She took a deep breath. It's now or never, she thought.

In one quick, fluid movement, she leaped to her feet and jumped into the boat. Mrs. Drake screamed.

"What are you doing here? How did you get free?" Mrs. Drake shrieked at Nancy.

Nancy could see that Jade was pawing the bottom of the boat, searching frantically for her gun. Nancy grabbed her arm, stopping her. At the same time, Griffin pulled the throttle, and the motorboat sputtered and kicked into gear. It sped away from the beach and into the Gulf.

"The panther!" Mrs. Drake shouted. "Jade, give me the panther!"

But Jade was still searching, groping along the bottom of the boat for her gun. Nancy grabbed her other arm and pinned her down. The panther fell out of Jade's hand. Mrs. Drake grabbed the panther and clutched it to her chest.

Nancy could see out of the corner of her eye that Griffin wanted to come to his girlfriend's rescue. But there was no way he could do that and operate the boat at the same time.

Then Jade kicked out at Nancy and managed to break her hold. She got her hand on the gun, which was lying on top

of one of the life preservers, and held it up in the air. "Got you," she snapped at Nancy.

At that very moment an enormous sea creature rose out of the Gulf. A manatee, Nancy realized, recognizing the amazing-looking creature from all the pictures she'd seen. Startled, Jade screamed and dropped the gun into the water.

"Jade, the gun!" Griffin yelled.

Taking advantage of the commotion, Nancy reached over to Mrs. Drake and wrestled the panther away from her.

"Give that back!" Mrs. Drake screamed. "Give me back my panther!"

"I don't think so, Mrs. Drake," Nancy said, holding the panther over the side of the boat. "You tell Griffin to head back to shore, or I'm dropping this thing into the water."

All of a sudden Nancy was aware of the low roar of another motor. She glanced up. A boat with a high-beam light was coming their way, cutting through the dark water.

"Nancy! Are you okay?" a familiar-sounding voice cried out.

It was Susan. Nancy realized that her friend had arrived with help, as promised. Nancy could make out a couple of park rangers in the boat with her.

Nancy turned to Mrs. Drake with a smile. "It's over, Mrs. Drake. And for you, too, Jade and Griffin. You're all going to be under arrest in about five seconds."

Mrs. Drake stared forlornly at the panther statuette. “We were so close,” she whispered. “So close.”

Bess leaned back in the white wicker beach chair, her face buried in the front page of the morning newspaper. She, Nancy, George, and Susan were hanging out at a small, private beach near Flamingo that belonged to some friends of Susan’s.

“Check out this headline, guys,” Bess gloated, holding up the paper. “ ‘Park volunteer and teen friends save rare Calusa artifact. Esther Drake of Panterra Corp arrested.’ Are we cool, or what?”

Nancy grabbed the newspaper from Bess. She quickly scanned the story. She knew their adventures had made major headlines all over Florida.

Two days ago, after Mrs. Drake, Jade, and Griffin had been taken into custody by the park rangers, Nancy and her friends had returned to Flamingo. Nancy had presented the Calusa statuette to the head of the park’s archaeological division.

He wasn’t the only one who had been incredibly grateful. Jeff Kelly, the leader of CAMC, had called Nancy after reading the story in the *MiamiHerald*.

“Even though Bill Drake didn’t know anything about his wife’s activities, this is going to be bad publicity for Manatee Commons,” Jeff had said to Nancy. “Maybe this will be the end of that project. That would be good news for CAMC, and more importantly, for the Everglades. We owe you girls a great deal.”

Susan's voice cut into Nancy's thoughts. "I still can't believe Jade turned out to be a crook. I thought she was my friend."

"I'm sorry Jade disappointed you," Nancy said to Susan. "But look on the bright side. You may have lost a friend, but we found a rare Calusa Indian artifact!"

"Yeah, Susan. The park is going to love you forever. They'll probably promote you to president or something," Bess piped up.

Susan smiled. "Anyway, we can finally relax and have a real vacation together."

"We have three more days till we have to head back. That's plenty of time for me to work on my tan," Bess said.

"And plenty of time for Nancy to stumble into another mystery—if we're not careful," George joked.

The girls burst into laughter.